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**Towards a Pedagogy of Human Connection: Understanding Teachers' Experiences of
Connection During a Pandemic**

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Montclair, NJ

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Dissertation Chair: Dr. Monica Taylor

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

**Towards a Pedagogy of Human Connection: Understanding Teachers' Experiences of
Connection During a Pandemic**

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Abstract

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools shuttered quickly and re-opened slowly. These decisions impacted the well-being of teachers and students. Upon re-opening, schools in New Jersey adopted a range of instructional approaches—including virtual and hybrid models—that prioritized safety and diminished human connections. This came at a time when rates of isolation and loneliness were increasing and the US was already experiencing a crisis of connection. To understand teachers' experiences with human connection during the winter and second spring of the COVID-19 pandemic, this dissertation study recruited nine high school teachers from one school in New Jersey who met a total of nine times from January, 2021 through June, 2021, to discuss their experiences of connection. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis and a theoretical frame of human connection, this study found that teachers' experiences were best described as dis/connections. Teachers' pursuits of connection were undertaken to support learning and develop relationships. However, these efforts were not always reciprocated by students, administrators, or parents during the pandemic context, leading to experiences of disconnection. Multiple obstacles yielded a "wall" of disconnection, however, teachers adopted practices and perspectives to overcome this wall. Successful experiences of connection were marked by reciprocity and mutuality, supported by a capacity for vulnerability. Additionally, the group itself became a site for professional connection during a time of isolation. Teachers' experiences of dis/connection during the pandemic reflected the political realities of teachers' lives and the ways that mutual vulnerability and authenticity are necessary in schools and classrooms if human connection is expected to thrive. Implications from this study include the emergence of a framework for a pedagogy of human connection that aims to humanize teaching and learning in a context of cultural and social dehumanization.

Keywords: *human connection; teacher identity; classroom connections; COVID-19; teacher emotions; pedagogy of human connection; teachers' experiences; dis/connection*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On the afternoon of Friday, March 13th, 2020, I sat in a crowded school auditorium with other nervous teachers, waiting for the administrators to reveal how our district would respond to the emerging health crisis surrounding novel coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19). Throughout that week, fewer and fewer students had reported to class. The faculty lounge talk was growing frantic with worry over when, or if, the state or local administrators would close the school. Rumors swirled about COVID-19 cases at nearby schools and what the governor or the president could (or would not) do next. At lunch before the meeting, my peers and I discussed ways we might potentially teach from home. When someone suggested we use video conferencing to host classes, I shuddered. The concept seemed to me a heartless and unimaginative facsimile of my classroom: a disconnected and dead version of the vitality I attempted to maintain on a daily basis.

During that Friday the 13th meeting, we were told that we would transition to remote learning beginning Monday. Teachers were at liberty to select the methods of instruction that made the most sense to them, but our goal was to maintain continuity and support our students. I was relieved that the administration appeared to prioritize the human side of things. Still, to my dismay, our administration encouraged video conferencing. And while I would like to say that my rationale for dismissing this practice was rooted in academic or intellectual reasoning, in truth any suggestion would have seemed wrong to me. Closing schools seemed wrong to me; the existence of a new, deadly, and rapidly spreading virus seemed wrong to me; the world seemed all kinds of wrong to me. I was consumed by anxiety and veering towards a depression.

Under lockdown orders but still working, my relationship with the world became almost entirely digitized. I ordered my groceries online and saw my mother through FaceTime. The

previously vibrant lunchroom conversations with work friends became a near-constant group text. I maintained my disdain of video conferencing, but I did not want to abandon my students, so I began to write my classes letters which I posted to our Google Classroom every Sunday. I invited the students to write back, and they often did. With work-peers, the conversations were initially a matter of practice: which new methods or technologies have you tried? How did it go? What was your logic? But there was also a sense of shared care: How are you doing? How are your students doing? What do you need?

I experienced the early pandemic period as a time of raw emotion. Through letters and texts, I learned of my students' and peers' distant family members who contracted the virus. We watched hospitals overflow until a ship arrived in New York Harbor to support the efforts. And then came reports of people we knew who died from the virus—grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles. We mourned them the best we could, from a distance. When George Floyd was murdered in late May, we mourned for him, too, and when the streets erupted against racial injustice over his death, we echoed the calls for justice online and in text. Although every week seemed to bring a unique varietal of fear and controversy, throughout April, May, and June of 2020, my students' letters and my peers' text messages reassured me that I was not alone in whatever I was feeling and experiencing.

At the end of June, I nervously scheduled a video conference with each of my classes. I missed my students deeply, but I was afraid seeing them over video would be too hard, like visiting a dementia patient who no longer knows your face. I worried that our letter exchanges had not been enough, that distance and time had completely severed our classroom connection. But, to my relief, the calls ran beyond their scheduled times. The students eagerly described their boring days, their frustrating jobs, and their inspiring new hobbies. They had begun to navigate

their devastated worlds. They let down their guards completely on that call and, in turn, so did I. What else was there to do? The physical classroom we shared was closed but, in the end, we still had each other. The calls ended with me near tears, filled with gratitude and convinced that this frightening new normal contained real potential for me to truly understand what it means for me, and other teachers, to connect with my students and my peers, my family and the world.

In this chapter, I build on this experience and others from the pandemic to describe my rationale for a study attempting to understand teachers' experiences with connection in the pandemic context. To begin, I open with a statement of the problem, which lies in the tension between recent recognitions in scholarship and teaching practice which see schools as emotional spaces and the larger disconnections (emotional and otherwise) and instances of isolation which prevail in our culture. This disconnection has been termed the crisis of connection (Way et al., 2018), and that notion helps center the need for a study of teachers' experiences of connection, which leads to the research questions at the heart of this study. Following this, I describe the context of this study to establish a clear image of what was studied, why it was studied, and where.

Statement of the Problem

In any context, teaching is an emotionally-laden human endeavor (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Nias, 1996; Noddings, 2005; Zembylas, 2003). Students come into schools bearing all forms of emotional weight, and classrooms develop their own emotional ecologies (Zembylas, 2013). Teachers, too, bring their own emotional stories with them and these can interact with students' emotional histories to create a kind of compounded trauma in some classrooms (Taylor & Klein, 2023). In addition to complex emotional lives, we know that teachers' and students' experiences in the world are shaped by the social structures and circumstances in which they

live; their realities are formed by the ways they identify themselves or are (mis)identified by others, as well as their access to resources and capital (Anyon, 1981; Ravitch 2020). This is not new knowledge. Shortly before the pandemic settled its existential heft on the globe, American schools were being acknowledged as emotional spaces, and teachers were being called on to incorporate social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices (Atkins et al., 2010; Jennings et al., 2000; Kataoka et al., 2002; Reinke et al., 2011; Saxena et al., 2013; Walter et al., 2006; Zins & Elias, 2006).

At root, that pre-pandemic movement towards acknowledging and incorporating students' and teachers' emotional realities into school culture and classrooms was an extended critique of the hyper-individualist culture which proliferates in schools (Way et al., 2018). This push-back has a humanizing edge which highlights a duality inherent in the educational landscape, both pre-pandemic and now. There has been a tension between the desire to quantify student and teacher performance through test scores and the growing need to acknowledge the individual experiences behind—and potentially the structures that inhibit or support—those scores. This tension is but one facet of our ongoing and collective social disconnection known as the crisis of connection (Way et al., 2018). The crisis of connection, in turn, can help us understand how the pandemic has perpetuated existing cultural divides. In this way, understanding the roots of pre-pandemic cultural and emotional disconnections can help situate the dire need to understand the real value of connections in schools.

The Crisis of Connection

The crisis of connection was cultivated in a hierarchical patriarchal system that thrives on and perpetuates binary conceptions of class, culture, gender, and race (Way et al., 2018). The effects of this crisis are wide-ranging, and findings from research in fields from evolutionary

anthropology to neuroscience have led to what Way et al. (2018) have dubbed the science of human connection. The science of human connection is, in many ways, a study of cultural disconnections. It is the culmination of decades of research findings that collectively point to the ways that a highly individualistic culture based on white patriarchal mythologies have led to a hierarchical system that legitimates humane privileges for a few and dehumanizes many through stereotyping, neglect, and other forms of violence (Way et al., 2018). According to the authors, perhaps the most prevalent and persistently unquestioned cultural myth in the white patriarchal canon is the narrative of the rugged individualist whose capacity to reason has led him to some faux evolutionary zenith. As anthropologists and social psychologists have learned, rather than survival of the fittest, humanity has more likely survived through cooperation and companionship (Brach, 2018; Brown, 2012; Christakis, 2019). Our capacity to connect and nurture, rather than isolate or dominate, may have been our evolutionary salvation.

Culturally, however, we have been trending against our nature. Over the last century, distrust has risen while empathy has waned, and anxiety, depression, and loneliness have become rampant (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009; Lieberman, 2013; Way et al., 2018). As goes the culture, so goes the classroom. School violence has been on the rise for many years (Eisenbraun, 2007), with recent scholarship recognizing the role of mental health in school violence (Polanin et al., 2021). In addition, for too many schools, *de facto* segregation persists throughout the US. Particularly in New Jersey, where poor and working-class students of color are currently more segregated from their more affluent white peers than their counterparts in former confederate states (Orfield, 2021). Schools' cultures and conceptions of knowledge are influenced by state and federal policies which exacerbate existing sociocultural disconnections and inequalities through accomplishment- or obedience-oriented classroom practices (Bryan, 2018; Dumas &

Ross, 2016; Weis & Fine, 2012). Dumas and Ross (2016) pointed to the ways that neoliberal policies—which privilege private goods at the sake of the public—are steeped in individualistic ethos that echo the myth of meritocracy. As Dumas and Ross (2016) argued, this policy approach positions poor children and children of color at a disadvantage and then characterizes them and their communities as deficient for not moving up the proverbial ladder. In reality, it is often systemic racism that prevents these students from realizing the neoliberal promise. For instance, when working-class Black boys' bodies on school playgrounds are over-policed and create a playground-to-prison pipeline (Bryan, 2018), what real chance do they have at getting ahead of—or on equal footing with—their more affluent peers? As a result, children of color and poor children will then

inhabit a psychic economy of class that is defined by fear, anxiety and unease, where failure looms large, and success is elusive, a space where they are positioned, and see themselves as, losers in the intense competition that education has become. (Reay, 2010, p. 400)

The crisis of connection is a worldwide phenomenon. Disconnection abounds in places where individual success is prioritized over the well-being of the whole; where binary organizations of human culture and society proliferate; and where competition is seen as necessary to success (Way et al., 2018). Hate crimes are on the rise and hate groups are emerging throughout the United States (Fadel, 2019). Suicide as a result of depression and social isolation have significantly increased in the last two decades, and drug addiction from the opioid epidemic has decimated families and neighborhoods (Vance, 2016). And while all of this is evidence of a larger disconnection, the findings most relevant to the pandemic are found in the data on social isolation.

Social isolation has emerged as a serious, potentially deadly, element of the connection crisis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that isolated people are more likely to be violent with partners, children, or elderly people with whom they live (Wilkins et al., 2014). The perpetrators of mass shootings in the United States are most often young white males who are described by themselves and others as lonely, isolated, alienated and lashing out against a solitary existence (Langman, 2009). Isolation and loneliness are also linked with physical health effects: isolation weakens the immune system and is related to higher rates of heart disease, stroke, and dementia (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Clearly, “our social and emotional needs and capacities are not simply feel-good issues; they are matters of life and death” (Way et al., 2018, p. 38).

Other findings from the science of human connection revealed just how powerful social and interpersonal connectivity can be: individuals with strong connections to social networks or groups have been found to have physical wounds that heal more quickly, be more resilient against serious disease, and ultimately live longer. Referencing a study from the University of Virginia that showed how individual perceptions of a task’s difficulty changed when in proximity to close friends, Way et al. (2018) observed, “The world sounds and looks less stressful when standing next to, or even thinking about, a person to whom one feels close” (p. 22). If disconnection can be deadly, connection can be life-affirming.

The pre-pandemic teaching context was already isolating. Through neoliberal reforms aimed at promoting individualism by focusing on test-scores, and a political and cultural background steeped in division, teachers’ experiences are often reflective of social trends. Therefore, a close examination of teachers’ experiences during the pandemic can lead to greater understanding of this phenomenon’s relationship to the crisis of connection. Put differently,

surviving the pandemic required social disconnection in varying degrees for humans across the globe. Understanding the experiences of teachers, who rely on a multitude of connections in their work, attempting to connect in a disconnected setting may well yield some essential understandings about the science of human connection.

In order to understand this phenomenon, I explored the following research question:

- How did teachers experience human connection during a pandemic?

To support this endeavor, I also explored the following sub-questions to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the experience. These sub-questions are:

- What kinds of connection did teachers experience with students, peers, and administrators in this context?
- What practices did teachers employ in pursuit of connection with students, peers, and administrators in this context?
- What meanings did teachers make from these experiences?

The remainder of this study examined teachers' experiences in pursuit of connections during a pandemic in an effort to contribute to the field of teacher knowledge and the emerging science of human connection. In the section that follows, I describe the lived context of the study, hoping to illuminate the complexities of the time in which this study took place.

Context of the Problem

When I was told on that Friday in March, 2020, we would be closing campus—"going virtual" was the nomenclature—I entered a state of deep emotional concern. There was, first and foremost, the inescapable mortal dread I experienced at the prospect of me, my loved ones, or my students contracting this new deadly virus. I was afraid that lives would be lost, but I also feared the loss of connection that would inevitably come from the lockdown measures. I

wondered how it would be possible to teach—to connect, relate, and learn from each other—with all of this fear in my heart. Situating the emotional and contextual reality of teaching during the pandemic, particularly my experiences as an educator in the context that I studied, is important to understanding my larger rationale for this study. In support of this, in the sections that follows, I describe my contextual experiences teaching during the pandemic and how this led to the theorization of a pedagogy of human connection, at which point I will then move into chapter two of this dissertation, describing the specifics of my theoretical framework and its function in this research.

Fostering human connection in the classroom—or, committing acts of emotional knowledge, love, or care—is an act of rebellion. As hooks (1994) wrote: “The restrictive, repressive classroom ritual insists that emotional responses have no place” (p. 155). In many ways, the repressive classroom ritual is the norm. Connectivity, relational teaching, love pedagogies: these are the legacy of radical feminist scholars. Emotions are outlaw in an educational world of high stakes testing where objective, rationalistic ideals are curricular fundamentals. As such, connecting with students under even the most ordinary circumstances is a challenge. Teaching during the pandemic provided firm limitations to this essential educative endeavor.

From March until June 2020, I engaged in what scholars have since termed emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Emergency remote teaching described, specifically, the ad hoc techniques teachers employed to cope with the abrupt transition to online learning during the pandemic. It stands in contradistinction to online teaching which is a routine approach to education, planned carefully in advance using a body of evidence-based practices and philosophies (Arrington, 2020). ERT is what happened when I recorded and uploaded

lectures in March; ERT is what I practiced when I wrote my students letters in April. ERT looks exactly how it sounds: teaching by whatever means necessary, or available, during an emergency.

Still, because a pandemic is a global phenomenon, there was a flurry of scholarly and popular recommendations for how to employ ERT practices. Summarily, these recommendations can be organized into three major themes: compassionate awareness, modeling open communication, and pedagogical flexibility. Compassionate awareness encouraged teachers to be empathetic to their students' plights during such a trying time. Modeling open communication meant that teachers could admit when they did not know something and could share openly what they needed to know. Pedagogical flexibility meant meeting every student where they are, to assess their needs and allow that to influence instruction and performance assessment, particularly where technical and practical capacities (e.g., reliable internet, a quiet space to work, etc.) varied from home to home. In some ways, it seemed as if emotional knowledge, love, and care—those otherwise outlaw concepts—were suddenly endorsed as the new standard. My own principal at the time, who was notorious for the sign on his desk that read simply, “No,” became visibly emotive during virtual meetings and he frequently and emphatically encouraged the staff to be empathetic, flexible, and understanding. This, to me, was more proof that the world was starkly changing and I wondered how long our concern for the collective welfare would last.

The return to school in September partially answered that question. Summer of 2020 was marked by contentious, if not outright confusing, discussions on when and how to return to school (Heyboer & Johnson, 2020; Silva, 2020). Fears of learning loss surfaced, and talk of measuring or maintaining student achievement complicated the discussion (Soland et al., 2020). I wondered where emotion, care, and love now fit into this all-too-familiar conversation. And

then, as the summer waned across the country, teachers who were hailed as heroes in March and April were suddenly being admonished for not wanting to re-enter their schools (McConnell, 2020). By September, schools throughout New Jersey, where this study took place, were given operational guidelines from the state but ultimately left to their own local decisions on how best to proceed with teaching and learning. That uncertainty is worth noting in understanding the rationale for this work. As such, I next detail my school's approach to demonstrate the local context. Then, I detail how I was feeling at the prospect of actuating this plan. Taken together, the district's plan to re-open and my emotional response to this plan describe the meso- and micro-level context for the study (Anderson & Scott, 2012). In this way, I believe that my state of mind and the status of my school's re-entry plan provide a more complete context for this study.

An Impossible Puzzle

Gateway High School re-opened its doors on September 8, 2020. For the first two weeks, all students would remain virtual. Following this initial all-virtual period, students had the option to continue to learn remotely from home or to attend school partially in-person (hybrid). Students who chose hybrid would spend one abbreviated day per week on campus. Only one grade-level would attend per day (i.e., 9th grade on Monday; 10th grade on Tuesday, etc.) so that no more than 25% of the student population would be on campus at any time. This study does not attempt to judge or justify this approach. Instead, understanding the schedule was important because it was an obstacle to connection that was also necessary for our collective safety. From a safety perspective, the reduced schedule made sense. From my teacher perspective, the reduced schedule created an impossible puzzle.

The school year began with approximately 75% percent of all students at Gateway learning from home on any given day, with a maximum 50% of each grade-level attending in-person on one single day of the week. In real-time, this meant that for three schooldays per week, all students were virtual. However, one day per week, about half of the students in a single grade-level class would be in the room. As a matter of practice, this was an entirely new and unclear paradigm. In a journal entry from late August, after the re-entry plan was finalized, I wrote: “I think today it finally hit me that this school year will be like none other. I feel pretty overwhelmed and really uncertain about how to proceed. There is just so much to think about, from planning to practice” (Personal Journal, August 24, 2020).

Two weeks before school was set to open, I went back to campus for the first time since March 13th, 2020. I was sad and missed my students. I knew that no matter what else happened that year—or, at least, during the first few months—we were entering uncharted territory. On that day, two weeks before school would start, I sat alone in my classroom and pondered the year ahead:

[T]his is really a moment of reckoning: when your instruction time is limited, when you won't be able to see your students' faces all in one room, when you lose the energy of the group, when you're teaching against a backdrop of immense political turmoil & deep uncertainty over the future, what do you do? Do you push on, focusing on content? Or do you dive into the personal? How do you define meaningful instruction now? What matters: to you, to them, to the future? How do you prepare them? What do you prepare them for? (Personal Journal, August 25, 2020)

Some of these questions existed during even the best circumstances. Yet, as with all things during the pandemic, there was an urgency to them. Something larger than usual was at stake when we went into the schools that September: our lives were on the line. And while that was a very literal truth, at risk was also the quality of the relationships that make-up a classroom, a school, a community. Disconnection appeared to be the new norm, like it or not.

And yet, like hooks (2001), I believed in the principles of a love ethic: to show my students care, respect, knowledge, and the will to cooperate. And while I was only barely willing to cooperate with a physical return to campus in September, I brought my care, respect, knowledge, and love to the work I needed to do. And I was not alone. As the plans for our school's return to the classroom were finalized, group texts with fellow teachers sprang back to life. Again, we were concerned for our well-being and that of our students. Acceptance was hard and what we could not accept, we planned around.

Planning brought me back to earth. In another journal entry from late August, I noted the twin stressors of the 2020 political climate and the pending the chaos of the new school year. I wrote "the root of my frustration in both [political and school-related] instances is the actual lack of control. It's the uncertainty" (August 23, 2020). My practice was all that I could control. Conversations with peers echoed this approach. We knew that we were facing an uncomfortable and uncertain school year. An answer to the question, "What do you prepare them for?" became clear to me: I prepare them to stay human, in spite of all the turmoil and uncertainty. As such, I set out plans to prioritize making connections in my classroom for the 2020–2021 pandemic school year.

As is often the case in education, my peers remained an important source for me to better understand my practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In talking with peers, I came to understand that

I was not alone in the pursuit to put aside the standard curriculum and center my classroom on building relationships. I began to understand how the questions I journaled about were not just private worries, they were also common concerns. These concerns were also reflective of the larger conversation about the role of connection in education. The science of human connection has revealed the extensive individual and collective risks of a disconnected society, specifically during pre-pandemic conditions. If one's physical wellness was related to the power of one's real-world connections, teachers and students faced a kind of peril when the classroom became a site of literal disconnection. With the understanding of what was at stake in this school context, and with the knowledge that teachers would be attempting to make connections in spite of the tactical challenges, I set out to make sense of these experiences.

A study such as this requires a unique theoretical framework. To that end, Chapter 2 of this dissertation advances a pedagogy of human connection, which is a theoretical view developed from larger conceptual understandings of the interplay between contextual pandemic experiences and the scholarship of educational philosophers as well as research from the science of human connection. This theoretical framework is followed by a literature review of the extant studies surrounding emergency remote teaching (ERT) practices intended to support connections in pandemic classrooms, as well as relevant findings from educational studies from the science of human connection. The literature review also demonstrates what has been studied about the role of emotions in classrooms, from conceptions of emotional ecologies (Zembylas, 2013) to wholehearted approaches to teaching (Brown, 2012). The literature review is then followed, in Chapter 3, by a thorough description of the research methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and the corresponding data collection techniques. Additionally, the methodology section describes how I ensured trustworthiness using a range of qualitative

research tools and, importantly, contains an independent audit, which is a powerful tool used in IPA methodology to ensure trustworthiness. In Chapter 4, I provide a comprehensive review of the setting and participants before detailing my thematic findings, which are guided by the language of the participants in order to evoke their experiences and subdivided by theme.

Following this, in Chapter 5, I begin by orienting the reader to my experiences as researcher, completing the hermeneutic circle of IPA research before discussing the findings of this study and the corresponding implications for teachers, teacher educators, school administrators and future researchers. In this final chapter, I also discuss the limitations of this study before offering concluding thoughts about the nature of human connections now and in the future.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In this chapter, I begin by advancing the theoretical framework of a pedagogy of human connection. This framework anchors the dissertation in the poststructural feminist ideas which inspired this research and supported my interpretation of the findings. A pedagogy of human connection brings together the concepts of emotional knowledge, love, and care to articulate the interdependent nature of these concepts in schools and in research on human connection. This framework, I contend, is integral to this work given the prevailing isolation during the first year of COVID-19. Following this theoretical positioning, I describe the scholarly literature related to several elements of this study. I begin the literature review by distinguishing between research in online teaching, pandemic teaching, and emergency remote teaching (ERT). From here, I describe ERT studies which may have supported connection during the pandemic; this, in turn, leads to a review of literature around trauma-informed teaching. Finally, the literature review concludes with an exploration of relevant themes from recent studies on teachers' experiences during the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework: Towards a Pedagogy of Human Connection

Every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges. (Noddings, 2012, p. 771)

Education is fundamentally about making human connections. In ways both literal and metaphorical, the science of human connection reflects the science of teaching and learning. Still, given the range of interpretations and implications possibly connoted by the word "connection," it is helpful to examine the concept of connection for the purposes of this project. Connection connotes both the mechanical and the metaphysical: I can connect to the Wi-Fi and to the preacher's message. Connection in school is simultaneously physical and emotional,

practical and intuitive. Teachers can use specific practices, such as ice breakers, to support peer-to-peer connections during the first days of class together. Teachers can also connect in more emotive ways through relational teaching practices and engaged pedagogical stances. The distinction may be a matter of heart and purpose. Any teacher can organize and execute a series of ice breakers in her first class, but whether those students feel connected—to each other, to their teacher, to the world—is not accomplished through a single activity. There is often something more essential to connection that arises in the physical classroom. A connection may begin with methods and practices, but for connection to endure, to be meaningfully human, there must be some emotional or relational element.

Accordingly, for the purposes of this dissertation, I offer an approach to a definition of connection rather than a static definition. Following Lanas and Zembylas (2015), I agree that “static definitions tend to lead to classifications which may exclude more possibilities than they bring” (p. 35). Still, in order to orient the reader, my approach to connection is the perception or recognition of mutual relational experiences or needs between people. This approach follows hooks’s (2001) notion that to connect is to “find ourselves in the other” (p. 93), and references Buber’s (1970/1996) assertion that “relation is reciprocity” (p. 67). This approach to connection leaves space for a wide range of degrees or depth of connection. As an example, in a classroom, a teacher may recognize that one of her students appears forlorn. In perceiving the students’ emotional state, the teacher may begin the process of connecting relationally—feeling-with the student as Noddings (1986/2013) suggested; engaging with what she knows of the child and of her own emotional knowledge—which is a kind of initial connection based on the teacher’s desire to find herself in the other. Then, if the teacher brings their concern to the child for support, and the child affirms the teachers’ feeling-with (i.e., agrees they are forlorn), then the

connection becomes mutually relational: the teacher's perception now matches the reality of the student and the connection deepens. Should the student, then, recognize the teacher's concern and experience their mutual relational care, then the connection is reciprocated, and they have found a part of themselves in the other. This example focuses on the relational, yet this approach to connection is broad enough to include a variety of connective scenarios. Conversely, following this approach, disconnection may be approached as the moment(s) when we seek ourselves in other people to no avail or without mutual recognition.

Connections in classrooms range from the environmental (Barrable, 2019), to the pedagogical (Arrastia, 2018), to the methodological (Dillon, 2008). Connections are also epistemological, as Palmer (1983/1993) argued: knowledge exists in a self that is in relationship—or, connected—with the knowable world. We know our self, and our world, through the ways we engage, connect, relate. In the words of Buber (1970/1996): “All actual life is encounter” (p. 62). The opposite of connection is isolation which, as shown through the science of human connection, can be dehumanizing. Isolation pulls us from the world, the self and, potentially, knowledge. Without the experiences of others, we are left alone with our confusions and curiosities. Even the most rudimentary learning metaphors require some kind of basic physical connectivity: the empty bucket needs filling; the fire needs kindling; the bank needs depositing.

Conversely, more sophisticated conceptualizations of education are explicitly focused on human connection. For example, Noddings (1986/2013) centered relational caring as a philosophical foundation of ethical education; hooks (1994) described the power of vulnerability and reciprocity in her engaged pedagogy; and Freire's (2014) pedagogy of the oppressed reminded us that the real liberatory potential in any classroom is located in recognizing and

nourishing our shared humanity. This human connection is in many ways fundamental to the work of feminist scholarship in education. Ellsworth (1989) and Saint-Pierre (2000) described the ways that feminist thought historically rejected binary conceptualizations of knowledge and privileged connected ways of knowing. Collins and Bilge (2016) also rejected binary, patriarchal ways of thinking and knowing, advocating for a shift from analyzing disconnections to examining interconnections. In this way, I establish these initial conceptions of a pedagogy of human connection in some of the integral elements of feminist education scholarship: emotional knowledge, love, and care. Emotional knowledge, love, and care represent the tripartite relational foundation of a pedagogy of human connection. In the following subsection, I outline these concepts and their role in education to help demonstrate how connections are, and have been, drivers of human-centered pedagogy.

Emotional Knowledge

Jennifer Nias (1996) wrote: “Teachers' emotions, though individually experienced, are a matter of collective concern: they are occasioned by circumstances which can be identified, understood and so have the potential to be changed, and their consequences affect everyone involved in the educational process” (p. 294). In other words, how teachers feel is a matter of importance to classroom and school settings. Teachers' emotions are related to their sense of self and can have an influence on their emotional experiences of teaching (Kelchtermans, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). Schlichte et al. (2010) showed how first-year teachers who felt unsupported experienced burnout which may help explain increased rates of teacher attrition. Jones and Kessler (2020) described the emotional fallout from rapidly shifting public opinions on the value of teachers during the first summer of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers' work is identity work, and their emotional realities support the extent to which they successfully navigate their

classrooms' needs. Still, reform efforts have fallen short of fully embracing this vital aspect of teachers' work.

Hargreaves (1998) advocated for the inclusion of emotion in educational reform efforts, and these reforms have only recently begun to take shape through social-emotional learning programs and trauma-informed teaching practices (Carello & Butler, 2015; Cavanaugh, 2016; Zins & Elias, 2007). More specifically, as an aspect of teacher knowledge, Zembylas (2007) made the case for including emotional knowledge as a facet of Shulman's (1987) pedagogical content knowledge, while Yoo and Carter (2017) showed that attending to emotional identity and supporting positive emotional growth were important aspects of professional development. Still other scholars took the role of emotions in schools further, recognizing emotion as part of the knowledge-making process and a source of knowledge itself (Forgasz & Clemans, 2014; Zembylas, 2010).

In particular, Zembylas (2003, 2004, 2007, 2010), one of the more prolific researchers on the topic of teacher emotions today, explored the philosophical and political complexities of teachers' emotions through a primarily poststructural feminist lens. Zembylas (2003) reminded us that the teachers' sense of self is "constructed and re-constructed through the social interactions that teachers have in a particular socio-cultural, historical, and institutional context. The search for understanding teacher identity requires the connection of emotion and self-knowledge" (p. 213). This returns to Nias's (1996) position that teachers' individual experiences of emotions are influenced by larger, political forces. Therefore, teachers' emotional knowledge can lead to critical understandings of the world in which teachers live and work, which is to say it can tell us something about the world which we have created.

Love

Emotional knowledge goes beyond the rational to inform the radical. Rooted in feminist epistemologies, social justice scholars have demonstrated the power of emotion to reject the same patriarchal, hierarchal, white supremacist ideologies that Way et al. (2018) have shown to be a source of major disconnection. Jaggar (1989) detailed the ways that emotions are outlaws in an intellectual world based on rationality and detached observation. In this way, emotion is subversive. Perhaps most subversive of all is the notion of love.

hooks's (2001) treatise on the topic emphasized love as an action, as a practice rather than a promise. hooks recognized that love is at the root of justice, writing "Without justice there can be no love" (p. 30). Love, in its truest form, is radical. For hooks, love combats materialism, fundamentalism, and fear; it supplants perfectionism, alienation, and narcissism. Love is an action, which means it is a movement in pursuit of connection: "The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other" (p. 93). Love is also self-reflective and adaptable, and asks us to take responsibility for ourselves, to enter into the vulnerabilities and recognize "our brokenness, our woundedness" so that we may heal our hearts in order to love more deeply and less fearlessly.

Similarly, Arrastia (2018) demonstrated the need for, and the value of, a love pedagogy, which she defined as a radical approach to teaching that requires direct confrontation with powerful emotions: "To practice a love pedagogy is to be in relationship with your own fragile state on Earth, your own pain, and your own suffering" (p. 233). Lanas and Zembylas (2015) also investigated the liberatory power of love as a revolutionary political and social project. They situated love within larger social justice pursuits, referencing Freire's (1994) depiction of love as acts of hope and bravery in the fight against oppression. For Lanas and Zembylas (2015), love is

relational and political, as it transcends the self and exists in relation with—or opposition to—sociopolitical contexts and histories.

Love is an action, an intention, a political statement that responds to and is influenced by the material and political contexts of our world. In pursuit of a pedagogy of human connection, love is the counterpoint to the isolating, individualist nature of our culture and it is a tool—political and relational—that can be used to push back against these forces in classrooms and beyond. Love is the radical kin of emotional knowledge and sister to care, which is the ethical and moral heart of a pedagogy of human connection.

Care

Noddings (1986/2013) positioned care as an ethical and moral counterpoint to the rationalist-objective thinking that proliferates in education. She challenged the existing paradigm by insisting that “The primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring” (p. 172). As a relational approach to education, the ethics of care is a treatise on the role of connection in schools, one that centers relationships as it explores what it means to be the one-caring and the cared-for. In this way, care moves beyond empathy, which Noddings (1984/2013) saw as rooted in logical, rationalistic conceptions of how someone must be feeling, and into “engrossment” (p. 30) which is a way of “feeling with” (p. 30) someone. This kind of feeling-with reflects a depth of relational understanding that supports deep connections between people, as it requires of the one-caring to push beyond logical assumptions of an other’s experience to “become a duality” (Noddings, 1984/2013, p. 30) with the cared-for.

Similar to hooks (2001), Arrastia (2018), Zembylas (2003), and Noddings (2005) also recognized that the individual capacity for care must be considered in light of the larger social

constructs of our world. Accordingly, Noddings (2005) proposed an alternative vision for schools, one which rejected the historically rationalistic, compartmentalized approach to liberal arts education in favor of a more relational, caring approach to schools which centered care in various ways (e.g., care for self, for strangers, for the environment, for ideas, etc.). Taken together, Noddings (1984/2013, 2005) individual and institutional approaches to care speaks to the greater need for relational alternatives to the isolation and loneliness of American culture (US Surgeon General, 2023). Care, as a possibility for deep empathy, combines with radical notions of love and teachers' capacity for emotional knowledge to create a pedagogy of human connection that moves from the individual to the cultural in pursuit of a more humane world.

Much of this work came as I considered the proliferation of disconnection experienced during a pandemic. It was a time of lockdowns and social distancing policies, when school buildings were closed or at minimal capacity, when my own classroom became a digitized facsimile of what it once was. As I sought to find myself in others, to connect with the world, I returned to these concepts of emotional knowledge, love, and care. When I considered what I had experienced in my virtual classroom and what I might have learned from my peers during this time, again, I began thinking about how I felt and how I might have demonstrated my care. As Noddings (1984/2013) wrote, "The receptive or relational mode seems to be essential to living fully as a person" (p. 35), and this was particularly true during the first eighteen months of the pandemic. As such, by framing this study within the theoretical framework of a pedagogy of human connection, I came to understand teachers' experiences with connection in a more enduring, nuanced way. Therefore, I believe a pedagogy of human connection can illuminate aspects of the participants experiences during the pandemic to help teachers, school leaders, and education researchers understand something about the nature of human connection in schools.

Accordingly, as this study took place during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the literature review that follows, I describe the findings of relevant studies of online teaching and pandemic-related teaching practices, as well as relevant scholarship on relational and trauma-informed teaching specific to the pandemic.

Literature Review

Perhaps the most apt metaphor for describing an attempt at teaching during a pandemic was the colloquial phrase, “building the plane while flying it.” The image evokes the cartoon physics of Wile E. Coyote rocketing through the air on a half-built ACME jet, hammer in hand, arms a-flurry as the wings, nose, and cockpit materialize from a cloud of chaos: the coyote frantic and focused, like teachers everywhere during the pandemic, doing whatever he can to keep from crashing into the desert rocks below. The image is frenetic, impossible, tinged with despair and yet not entirely without hope: *we will not crash, we will not crash, we will not crash.*

Not only might this be an apt description of how it felt to teach in this context, the sentiment was also reflected in the findings of the literature on teaching practices adopted during the pandemic. In the studies uncovered for this project, I found research that ranged in focus from a pragmatic survey of teachers’ perceptions of preparedness to teach online during the early days of the pandemic (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020) to an urgent call for a renewed commitment to radical social justice work post-pandemic (Ravitch, 2020). Throughout each pandemic-specific study, however, was the sense that educators were working in a state of uncertainty, and practices were adopted in triage. Given the high-anxiety context of teaching during a pandemic, along with the notoriously slow pace of academic publishing, it was not surprising that there was a lack of research on pandemic teaching experiences related to human

connections. Still, in the section that follows, I explicate what findings did exist across several relevant areas of study.

As a study of teachers' experiences of human connection during a pandemic, I pursued articles related to teaching in a pandemic context through both database searches and backwards referencing. In this way, much like Wile E. Coyote and teachers everywhere in 2020, I cobbled together an image of a landscape as I traveled over it, building the plane as I flew. What follows is an illustration of the relevant literature from studies of engagement and connection in online teaching, a practice that predated the shift to what has since been called emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020). The relevant studies of online teaching for connection were few but provocative and telling of the virtual classroom prior to COVID. Following this depiction of the literature around online teaching practices prior to the pandemic, I move into the literature of ERT which referenced pandemic-specific practices. This collection of recent scholarship opens the door for a long view of the horizon and what might come next, as I then focus on studies of relational teaching, student-teacher relationships, and trauma. In this way, I hope to establish what could have been, what is, and what might be found in the literature upon a safe landing. Given the paucity of available literature related to the pandemic context, I included studies that touch on a wide range of teaching experiences and context, from higher education to professional development studies. Finally, near the end of this section, I discuss the literature on teachers' emotion and COVID-19 so as to situate this study in a larger, relevant academic context.

Online Teaching, Pandemic Practices, and Emergency Remote Teaching

Distance learning via technology has existed in some form in the US since the 1930s, when radio broadcasted courses to students and, since then, the phenomenon of distance learning

has been adapted to reach learners in various circumstances (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). As recently as 2019, the National Center for Education Statistics found that slightly more than one-third of US undergraduate students have taken at least one online course (Lederman, 2019). In the public-school sector, approximately 20% of K–12 schools offered some courses entirely online as of 2018 (NCES, 2019). Given the proliferation of the internet as a learning tool, and the move towards online course offerings to promote enrollment and retention at the university level, online teaching has become a specialized form of education, with dedicated theories and practices specific to the digital realm. It follows that fostering student connection and engagement online requires different tools for specific supports and approaches.

Several frameworks existed for creating successful online interactions. Before detailing them below, I first want to note two caveats: first, the research in this area was concentrated primarily around higher education, and what few studies there were on K–12 schools focused on all-virtual settings. Second, as mentioned above, online teaching is a specialized approach to teaching—it is also a mode of teaching with stark contrasts to the emergency practices undertaken in the pandemic setting. I elaborate more on the second point later when I discuss “emergency remote teaching” or ERT. Meanwhile, in order to understand the ways teachers experienced connections in the pandemic context, I first explored the connective practices of online educators under ordinary circumstances to help locate teachers’ practical experiences in the pandemic within a larger historical context.

Frameworks

The frameworks for supporting student engagement in the online environment shared several commonalities. I understood them collectively as addressing *contextual awareness* and *individual identities*. Even while learning online, whether in college or elementary school,

students do not exist in a vacuum and teachers can attend to engagement by addressing their students' worlds in a variety of ways. This includes a consideration of the "ecosystems" that make-up the online environment (e.g., chat rooms or message boards; public postings or private messages) and using them to support engagement and visibility (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). Additionally, considering local cultural influences and habits can help students build beyond pedagogical content knowledge and basic technological usage to make online learning relevant in blended or virtual spaces (Adam, 2017). In order to cultivate social-emotional awareness, educators deliberately included opportunities for engagement that allow for recognition of diverse identities in otherwise isolating online spaces (Delahunty et al., 2014). Specifically, for the middle- and high-school setting, Borup et al. (2014) developed the adolescent community of engagement (ACE) framework that incorporated the role of the parent as part of a tripartite approach to engagement that included teachers as well as peers.

It is important to note that these frameworks were created to address the problem of disconnection and disengagement in online teaching under ordinary circumstances. The existence of such pre-pandemic frameworks indicated that connection and engagement were concerns for online teachers under even the most ideal circumstances. In this way, the literature above serves as a kind of normalized backdrop. This glimpse at what educators in online contexts were contending with foreshadowed the struggles of teachers attempting to connect with students online during a pandemic. Therefore, the proliferation of relational frameworks for online spaces highlighted the pre-existing, problematic nature of a disconnected virtual learning context.

In fact, scholars seeking to locate best practices for pandemic distance learning recognized a distinction between online teaching under ordinary circumstances and ERT

practices. This, in turn, prompted several scholars to recognize how “online teaching” is a separate conceptual and contextual approach to teaching, and the work of online educators is distinct from teachers who have gone online in response to a global disaster (Hodges, et al., 2020). This led to some scholars adopting and studying the concept of *emergency remote teaching* (ERT) (Alvarez, 2020; Arrington, 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). ERT explained the vast distance between online teaching under ordinary circumstances and the various virtual school models that were adopted worldwide to cope with the pandemic (Arrington, 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Ravitch, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). More specifically, Hodges et al. (2020) pointed out that online classes typically take professors months to plan and they often do so with the help of an expert instructional designer. Conversely, the authors positioned emergency remote teaching as a fast-response approach to an uncertain and evolving circumstance (i.e., a global pandemic), and the authors advocated for not equivocating the two and for teachers and institutions to take heed of this distinction. Indeed, as I move into the next section of the review, I refer to the group of studies initially sought for pandemic practices as emergency remote teaching (ERT) studies.

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

Perhaps now is a good time to remind the reader of our friend Wile E. Coyote building his plane mid-flight. As I explicate the literature on emergency response teaching and other pandemic-specific practices and findings, it may help to once again frame this emerging body of work as in-flight and in-progress. The studies here focus specifically on practices studied during the pandemic. Given that we are technically still living through the pandemic as I write this, the literature is similarly varied in scope and depth. In the section that follows, I distinguish between ERT literature three ways: (1) studies that focus on ERT practices for connection; (2) ERT

studies focused on equity and social justice; and (3) studies of ERT related to trauma-informed practices.

ERT Practices for Connection. The concern for connection was prevalent throughout the publications related to ERT. Connectivity in the COVID-context came with several specific recommendations which I have synthesized into the common practical themes of compassionate awareness, modeling open communication, and pedagogical flexibility. In this section, I elaborate on these themes, linking them in a way that will craft a cohesive thematic image of ERT practices. To be clear, what follows is a summation of various studies and editorials from scholar-practitioners sharing their experiences and findings during emergency remote teaching.

Compassionate Awareness. Compassionate awareness means teachers recognize that learning in a pandemic is an emotional and potentially traumatic experience (Crosby et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020; Ravitch, 2020; Ramrung et al., 2020). Attending to the emotional realities of the situation can provide a sense of safety, although Ramrung et al. (2020) cautioned that such safety cannot be universally guaranteed. Similarly, Crosby et al. (2020) advocated for embedding trauma-informed practices in pandemic teaching, framing the context as an example of collective trauma. Their work described the impact of collective trauma while also providing strategies and resources to navigate the pandemic context as well as suggestions for the return to in-person learning. The role of trauma in the larger pandemic context is further addressed later in the literature review.

Other practices of compassionate awareness included cultivating a sense of community (Searles, 2020; Smith, 2020) and modeling positive emotional engagement (Chu, 2020; Morgan, 2020). Cultivating a sense of community was a challenge for teachers, as students attempting to learn during a pandemic self-reported feeling isolated and struggled to engage with the online

class, despite feeling overall optimistic (Schaefer et al., 2020). Similarly, in a large study from China, Yao et al. (2020) found that when comparing distance learning that was self-paced versus synchronous teaching broadcasts, students performed better when they were online with an instructor. Additionally, Chu (2020) showed how his experience modeling aspects of positive psychology—including engagement—directly addressed the well-being of his undergraduate students and developed a positive learning environment in spite of working in an ERT setting. Taken collectively, these studies point towards both potential practices in support of, and challenges to, compassionate awareness.

Modeling Open Communication. A corollary to compassionate awareness is modelling open communications. Teachers who can attend to and respect the emotional experiences of emergency remote teaching in a pandemic can serve as models of communication and bravery for their students (Crosby et al., 2020; Ramrung et al., 2020). Modeling open communication included teachers and school leaders providing families and staff with answers to commonly asked questions as well as establishing quick communication methods, such as text chains, emails, and updating websites regularly (Crosby et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020). These practices were seen as beneficial to both students and families in the remote teaching context where clear instructions for even a simple-seeming task such as logging in to a specific site, can seem complex under the circumstances (Morgan, 2020). Modeling communication could also have included larger discussions of timelines which may have contributed to student time management (Searles, 2020). Similarly, maintaining a communication routine and posting announcements in the same place modeled open communication and allowed students to prepare in advance, particularly in the all-virtual setting (Avery et al., 2020).

Pedagogical Flexibility. When it came to teaching online during the pandemic, an international study of over 1,100 teachers found that 92% of American teachers surveyed had never taught online (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). This is not to say that these teachers did not use educational technology, nor that they were wholly unprepared to teach using online resources. In fact, Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) pointed out that in spite of their lack of experience teaching online, a majority of surveyed teachers were eager to try new practices during emergency remote teaching. This kind of flexibility reflected the experiences and findings of scholars such as Morgan (2020), who used guidelines from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) to develop their approaches to effective online teaching. Among their findings included the suggestion for educators to remain flexible. Similarly, Petillion and McNeil (2020) surveyed their undergraduate chemistry students throughout the semester and found that flexibility and assessment accommodations had potential to reduce student challenges during emergency remote teaching. Pedagogical flexibility relates to both compassionate awareness, too, as Ramrung et al. (2020) asked of ERT practices, “Have we lost sight of the need to show care and compassion towards our students and staff?” before defining care and compassion as part of a necessary response that “places students at the heart of teaching and learning, and focuses on the relational aspects and being reflexive” (paras. 3–4). For educators at all levels, emergency remote teaching is a chance to re-envision our practices, and several scholars, including Ramrung et al. (2020), advocated for flexibility and renewal.

ERT for Equity and Social Justice. One of the most widely cited works on ERT practices and social justice was Ravitch’s (2020) conceptualization of “flux pedagogy.” For Ravitch, flux pedagogy was a bridge between numerous radical, equity-focused perspectives that served as a collective framework for compassionate and critical education and leadership during

the early days of the pandemic. According to Ravitch (2020), flux pedagogy is "a humanizing pedagogy that can help educators to examine the goals and processes of schooling in this moment of extreme uncertainty" and is also "a framework for balancing radical compassion for students (and self) with high-yet-humane-calibrated expectations" (p. 4). She connected this pedagogy specifically to the pandemic context, but she also pointed to this framework's goals being ultimately located beyond the pandemic, suggesting the pandemic is a metaphorical portal in time and that the survivors would be the ones to decide what to bring with us into that new world. This pedagogical perspective drew on a multitude of critical perspectives to advance a more humane approach to teaching and leading in the time of flux and beyond. Ravitch's work focused on pandemic teaching practices, but it also went beyond ERT practices to look forward with an eye towards compassion and justice. As a theoretical framework, where the articles above described what had been stated elsewhere about online teaching practice, Ravitch's piece was less about reporting what had been found and more about building the pandemic chaos into something vital and radical as we begin to grow and heal following the trauma of the pandemic.

In the same way that Ravitch (2020) framed the pandemic as an opportunity for renewal in practice and approach to schooling, Gleason and Berg (2020) also suggested that the pandemic provided an unexpected opening for teachers to adopt equitable practices. They suggested three types of practice: knowing students and families; inquiry-based teaching; and expanding student agency and choices. They argued that these approaches could provide teachers ways to connect in deeper ways while also promoting equity given their experiential and equity-oriented stances. In the end, the authors advocated for the ERT period to be a space for checking beliefs, actions, and systems to ensure that equity becomes an essential component of teachers' practice.

As is often the case in education, teacher practice can be both an opportunity for advancing an equity agenda and a trap for perpetuating the status quo. Arrington (2020) described the potential limitations of emergency remote teaching (ERT) at the undergraduate level and characterized the resulting behaviorist-oriented approaches to teaching (e.g., packets of content; pre-recorded lectures; easily quantified assessments) as a threat to critical practices. To ensure that critical pedagogues continue their work, Arrington (2020) detailed approaches to, and rationales for, maintaining critical spaces and working against blind recapitulation of dominant discourses and literacy practices. He pointed specifically to critical pedagogy and critical literacy, as well as inquiry stances, as frameworks to support students' efforts to understand inequities in their lives, particularly in the existing social-pandemical context.

The scholarship on ERT and social justice reflects a concern for what is and what can be. Like so much critical work, these scholars demonstrated the ways that the pandemic context is both rife with systematic issues of inequity and sociocultural disconnection, but is also an opportunity to advance projects of equity. As evidenced in the introduction, the pandemic is occurring within a cultural crisis of connection. These twin crises disproportionately affect the lives of marginalized and oppressed students. And while the above-mentioned scholars provided practices that focus teachers' efforts, they can only go so far to mitigate the individual and collective traumas experienced in classrooms and homes during the pandemic. In the section that follows, I explore trauma in the pandemic teaching context as a way of addressing the aspect of isolation and disconnection.

Beyond ERT: Exploring Trauma in the Pandemic Teaching Context. Ogden and Fisher (2015) defined trauma as “any experience that is stressful enough to leave us feeling helpless, frightened, overwhelmed, or profoundly unsafe” (p. 66). Given this definition, it seems

fair to say that we, as a society, have experienced a collective trauma with the emergence of COVID-19 and the corresponding quarantine measures. During the first wave of lockdowns cases of domestic violence increased across the globe (Kourti et al., 2023). As noted by Phelps and Sperry (2020), the sheer act of closing schools may have meant the elimination of the only trauma-informed spaces experienced by some students. Accordingly, recent research bears out pandemic practices in support of engagement and connection. Prominent findings amongst the literature were repeated calls for trauma-informed practices, urging teachers, administrators and governments to consider the extent of our collective trauma as we eventually return to schools and campuses (Fortuna et al., 2020; Griffin, 2020; Minkos & Gelbar, 2020; Pica-Smith & Scannell, 2020). In the section that follows, I look first at these calls and their rationales before exploring related studies on trauma-informed practices for teacher educators in the pandemic.

The Need for Trauma-Informed Responses to a Pandemic

A common theme in the calls for trauma-informed practices was the recognition that COVID-19 disproportionately hurt Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Accordingly, a trauma-informed response was seen as an imperative approach to addressing inequities in physical and mental health outcomes in BIPOC communities (Fortuna et al., 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Pica-Smith & Scannell, 2020). Concerned with teaching in higher education, Pica-Smith and Scannell (2020) argued that the larger sociopolitical context of COVID-19, wherein various resistance movements and uprisings have occurred, requires a focus on students' and staff's emotional well-being. Going further, Fortuna et al. (2020) argued from a public health perspective the need for governments to support trauma-informed approaches as a means of addressing magnified toxic stresses in BIPOC communities further disenfranchised by the pandemic. The call for a trauma-informed COVID-19 response also came from Griffin

(2020) who considered such an approach to be a “universal precaution” in support of a collective psychological response to the pandemic. Like Griffin (2020), Harper and Neubauer (2020) referred to guidance from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) on trauma-informed care to describe a framework for school-level responses. Harper and Neubauer (2020) expanded SAMHSA’s foundational practices to “realize, recognize, respond, and resist retraumatization” (p. 21) to put forth a model for trauma-informed education and administration (M-TIEA) which includes six guiding principles: safety; transparency and trustworthiness; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; and empowerment, voice, and choice (pp. 20–21).

These recommendations align with the pre-existing conceptions of trauma-informed teaching. Carello and Butler (2015) looked at the ways they ensure physical and emotional safety in their classrooms to advance principles and practices of a trauma-informed, safe classroom: student characteristics, content presentation and processing, assignment requirements and policies, instructor behavior, student behavior, classroom characteristics, and self-care. Similarly, Cavanaugh (2016) described a multi-level support system for use in trauma-informed organizations, including safety and consistency, positive interactions, culturally-responsive practice, and peer supports, among others. Additional considerations included an assets-based approach as well as vicarious traumatization or the phenomenon by which teachers or social workers can be traumatized through exposure to stories of trauma from their students or clients. Vicarious traumatization, also known as secondary traumatic stress (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments [NCSSLE]), can have serious implications for teachers. In a related study, Klein and Taylor (2023) explored the relationship between teachers’ lives and secondary traumatic stress by examining their historical traumas as well as the those experienced

in the classroom as novice teachers. This study revealed the complex interplay between teachers' lived experiences, their classroom contexts, and the relationships they forge—or forego—with students who are likewise navigating their own experiences, contexts, and relationships. The work around vicarious trauma provides a relevant backdrop for understanding how teachers make meaningful connections in a traumatic, emergency, and distanced teaching scenario.

Teachers' Experiences During COVID-19

In addition to the emerging research that might have supported teachers' capacities for equitable, trauma-informed teaching during the pandemic, additional research has since emerged detailing the lived experiences of teachers during the pandemic. Primarily focusing on the experiences of teachers during the first year of the pandemic, this research includes teachers' experiences from across the globe, at all levels of education, in both public and private school settings. In an effort to situate this dissertation among the emerging research of teachers' experiences during COVID-19, I utilized backwards referencing and databases such as Google Scholar and EBSCO to locate studies that explored teachers' experiences during the pandemic. From the relevant literature, prominent themes emerged: struggle to adapt practices; concern for students; and professional/personal identity. In the section that follows, I review the relevant literature from each theme, providing an overview of the research on teachers' experiences during the pandemic.

Struggle to Adapt Practices. As schools around the world closed their doors and went online in mid-March 2020, teachers were expected to pivot to online teaching with very little warning. The research on teachers' experiences indicated that a common stressor was the struggle to adapt teaching practices from previous, historical classroom approaches to the new, digital classroom. Shimony et al. (2023) recognized remote teaching and its attending

adaptations as a primary source of stress and burnout in their cross-sectional study. The struggle to adapt teaching practices had several factors throughout the literature, including: negative feelings towards teaching online (Juarez-Diaz & Perales, 2021); adding extra stress and effort to teachers' workload (Johnson et al., 2020; Marek et al., 2021; Oliveria et al., 2021); and initial uncertainty over the efficacy of digital resources (An et al., 2021; Noor et al., 2020; Pryor et al., 2020; Tsegay et al., 2022).

Teachers who described having negative feelings towards teaching online tended to feel this way during the initial lockdown periods but changed over time (Johnson et al., 2020; Marek et al., 2021; Pryor et al., 2020). This indicated a kind of resilience in teachers from the onset of the pandemic through to later stages. For example, Oliveira et al. (2021) described how, during emergency remote teaching, the process of teachers adapting to the digital platform was seen as a negative experience while experiences using the platforms were mostly positive. This reflected how the emotional and cognitive efforts to take existing teaching methods and modify them for online usage, particularly during the onset of a pandemic, added extra stress to teachers' workload. For some teachers, the stress of modifying lessons or learning new platforms was attributed to the initial stages of burnout (Reich et al., 2020; Shimony et al., 2023).

For other teachers, the use of digital resources brought questions about efficacy. More specifically, An et al. (2021) found that student participation in online classrooms was a major challenge for teachers during the pandemic. Similarly, Noor et al. (2020) discussed that teachers experienced challenges from the digital nature of the resources themselves, with reliable internet and their own confidence in the technology—as well as the students' disinterest—combining to make considerable challenges. As such, in addition to the struggles teachers experienced with

their transition to digital classrooms, the literature revealed a persistent concern for students on the part of teachers, a topic to which I now turn my attention.

Concern for Students. Teachers' concern for students ranged widely, from their capacity to motivate pupils from a distance to worries of their overall well-being (An et al., 2021; Dayal et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Noor et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2022). Teachers also described witnessing inequities such as access to resources while teaching remotely during the pandemic (Juarez-Diaz & Peralez, 2021; Kraft et al., 2021; Reich et al., 2020). Still, others described being told to lower expectations for students during the pandemic (Love & Marshall, 2022). These studies reflect the ways that teachers' tendency towards care (Noddings, 1984/2013) persisted during the pandemic, despite the numerous barriers.

Motivating students through the barriers of digital teaching was one of the primary findings for Reich et al. (2020). Teachers in this study recognized how the distance between computers was a barrier to not only their familiar ways of teaching, but all of the attending distractions at each end of the computer screen. Additionally, Orhan and Beyhan (2020) found that engaging students was related to teachers' satisfaction, and when teachers could not satisfactorily engage pupils, they felt that distance or online learning was less effective.

This emotional response to the distance between teachers and students was also seen in studies where teachers worried for the overall well-being of their pupils (Robinson et al., 2020) and took efforts to support students despite this being a source of stress. For other teachers, their concern for their students was also a site of resilience (Varela & Fedynich, 2021), with Alvarez (2020) finding that listening to students' experiences helped them understand their own experiences of emergency remote teaching. Similarly, Miller (2021) found that teachers who were able to establish or maintain relational care with students during remote learning did so by

making their expectations clear and responding to students' social-emotional needs. These findings reflect the emotional nature of teaching, which is inherently care-oriented, emotional work (Hargreaves, 1998; Noddings, 1984/2013). The care-oriented, emotional aspect of teaching during the pandemic reflected teachers' experiences of professional and personal identity, concepts which are often interdependent (Zembylas, 2003).

Professional/Personal Identity. The literature revealed that teachers were often concerned about their personal and professional lives during the pandemic (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). Adapting teaching practices was a source of stress, not only because it required more work, but also because it required teachers to reassess why they do what they do (Kraft et al., 2021; Reich et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2022). Teaching during the pandemic also ask teachers to negotiate difficult work-life balances, including their roles as professionals and parents/caretakers/etc. (An et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Robinson, et al., 2022).

It is important to acknowledge that, per the literature, teachers' sense of personal and professional identity did not exist in a vacuum during the pandemic. Kraft et al. (2021) demonstrated how teachers in districts that had clear communication, relevant trainings, and reasonable expectations—among other elements—were more likely to maintain a positive sense of success during the pandemic. Conversely, some studies indicated that pointed out, teachers lost a sense of efficacy was lower during the classroom (Pressley & Ha, 2021; Kim et al., 2021) and professional identity was lost when classrooms went digital (Reich et al., 2020). The range of experiences and outcomes in these studies reflect the findings of Love and Marshall (2023), who examined the experiences of three teachers from across the US.

In their chapter, five teachers described their experiences of initial lockdowns and re-entry processes from spring 2020 through spring 2021. While “some experiences overlapped”

(Love & Marshall, 2023p. 104), they were often rooted in common frustrations with lack of communication from administrators and limited sense of autonomy. The work here reflects the collective threat teachers felt to their professional and personal identity. In the next section, I describe the role of existing mental health and well-being in studies of teachers' experiences during the pandemic.

Summary

This review of the literature related to pandemic teaching provided a research context for this study. The literature supported the idea that connection, in its various forms, was an important facet of teaching during the pandemic, from emergency remote teaching (Juarez-Diaz & Perales, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021) through the end of the 2020–2021 school year (e.g., Love & Marshall, 2023). These studies described the call for educators and administrators to be flexible, compassionate, and relationally-minded throughout the pandemic. Amongst this scholarship was also a stated need to continue addressing existing inequities and cultural disconnections which have been exacerbated by the pandemic so that we can move towards a more just future (Ravitch 2020). Finally, studies of teachers' experiences revealed common struggles and concerns that were relational, professional and personal. In the spirit of contributing to this emerging body of research describing teachers' experiences during the pandemic, I move next to an explanation of methodology utilized in this dissertation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This dissertation utilized the qualitative research method of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a means of understanding the complex, emotionally-laden experiences of teachers pursuing connection during the pandemic. In this chapter, I begin by explaining the need for qualitative research around COVID-19 before describing the study's research design using IPA. Following this, I describe in detail the research context for this proposed study; I then explain how participants were selected and where my own positionality fits into this research. Next, I detail my approach to gathering data, which included group conversations, collaborative journaling, and maintaining a research journal. Following this section, I describe my data analysis methods utilizing IPA tenets. Finally, I describe the ways that the design of this study ensured a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing data that yielded trustworthy findings.

At the onset of the pandemic, numbers were a scary thing. In the US, like many countries, it began with one confirmed case; then five, then seven (CDC, 2023). Meanwhile, nearly 300 cases had been confirmed throughout parts of Asia, and the city of Wuhan, China, with a population of 11 million, had been locked down. By the time the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, there had been over 118,000 cases and nearly 4,300 people had died (CDC, 2023). As schools shuttered and the virus spread, we were updated daily with statistics: positivity rates, case counts, deaths, and hospitalizations. The economic quotient added to the tally of what the pandemic had cost. Even as we moved towards a vaccine, the narrative was also statistically oriented, as experts debated efficacy rates. In addition to statistical updates, pandemic-related policy decisions such as the mandate to close New Jersey's schools in the spring of 2020 were based primarily on the number of positive cases, hospitalizations, et cetera.

While this is not to say that there were no qualitative ways of understanding or describing the pandemic, particularly early on. Instead, these observations are meant to underscore how the experiences of the affected and the unaffected, the deniers and the survivors, felt largely absent from the conversation surrounding COVID-19 and related policy decisions. This departure from the lived experiences of the pandemic prevented us from understanding how individual lives were altered by these statistically-oriented decisions. Specifically, in schools, where the reality of quantitatively-informed policy is not new, the importance of qualitative research in the pandemic teaching context is paramount. It appeared to me that an understanding the lived experience of teachers working in the virtual- and hybrid-classroom through qualitative research could lead to a more robust understanding of teachers' experiences as they attempted to make and define connection under traumatic circumstances.

Teachers have long lived the dual realities of quantitatively-supported education policies and human-oriented teaching practices. Since at least the 1980s, education has been culturally constructed as a driver for economic growth (NCEE, 1983). The resulting policy shifts have linked statistical value with teacher quality for a generation, and the role of quantitative data collection is paramount in public school systems of evaluation (McDonald et al., 2018; Strong, 2011). Given the proliferation of quantitative focus in schools, the value of qualitative education research which examines the lived experiences of individuals experiencing these policies becomes exponentially more important. The pandemic is a prime example of quantitatively-informed decision-making having an outsized effect on teachers. For example, while the decision whether to close public schools during the pandemic had been driven by quantitative measures (e.g., rates of transmission), there were teachers, students, and caretakers whose lives were influenced, if not outright changed by these decisions. In terms of connection, a quantitatively

sound decision to close a school with high infection rates effectively, and purposefully, severed the human connection for teachers and students. As both a microcosm of education policy's quantitatively-oriented landscape and a pivotal moment in the ongoing crisis of connection, a study of teachers experiences during a pandemic will best be understood qualitatively.

Specifically, for this study I will use a phenomenological approach as it is "well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 28). Life in a pandemic has been emotional and intense and the experiences of teachers need to be examined in order to understand the larger picture of life in a pandemic and its implications for education now and in the future.

In my conversations with peers in the spring, summer, and fall of 2020, it was clear that the pandemic was altering how we experienced our work. Among the numerous challenges my peers and I had faced, perhaps the most salient and common problem was the difficulty in making the same level of human connection with students amidst the political and emotional chaos of a pandemic and the physical social distance required for emergency remote teaching. A sense of isolation prevailed in both virtual and hybrid contexts. I was lonely. My peers were lonely. We talked about how we felt lost to our students. I felt instinctively that within this sense of loss there must be something meaningful. And so, to understand this shared problem, I decided to explore teachers' experiences of connection during the pandemic by recruiting a group of peers to discuss their lived experiences of the pandemic during the winter and spring of the 2020–2021 school year.

To return to the metaphor of building the plane while flying it, the methods I describe below are similarly patchworked. What follows is an explanation of the ways I used elements of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to support a kind of make-shift professional

learning community (PLC) where, instead of focusing on sharing practical knowledge with the goal of solving a common problem (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), this PLC was a space where teachers could connect with each other and disconnect from the isolation. This kind of connective space was inspired in part by Parker Palmer's (1998/2017) "community of truth" (p. 92). In this space, teachers discussed practical approaches in pursuit of connection while also relating their experiences with connection. This approach was designed to facilitate the kind of inquiry culture that had been shown to lead to a more supportive experience for participants, particularly during a time of uncertainty (Snow-Gerono, 2002). In this way, the group was a space for understanding our knowledge-in-practice, where knowledge could be emotional or experiential, and where we could come together with the understanding that "teaching is to a great extent an uncertain and spontaneous craft, situated and constructed in response to the particularities of everyday life in schools and classrooms" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 262). Given the heightened uncertainty and spontaneity required of teachers throughout the pandemic, this cobbled-together version of an inquiry group allowed me to make space for my peers and I to share our experiences so that I can then attempt to understand what connection looked and felt like for these teachers during the second winter and spring of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Design

As a study of human experiences, this study's design used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative method useful for exploring and making sense of participants' experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA is a distinctive approach within the more common research method and philosophy of phenomenology. Phenomenology began as a philosophical concept that arose during the ideological crisis in Western thought following

World War I. As a research methodology, it was first employed by philosopher Edward Husserl who sought a new way to find certainty in an otherwise shattered post-war world (Groeneweld, 2004). In his pursuit of knowledge, Husserl rejected the kind of objectivity that permeated existing and popular positivistic views of sense-making; he posited that meaning came from immediate experiences with the external world, a position which entailed that meaning was found primarily in personal experiences with phenomena (Groeneweld, 2004). Husserl's ideas were advanced by philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose conceptualization of phenomenology held it as a "way to interpret experiences of shared meanings and practices embedded in specific contexts" (Byrne, 2001, p. 831). In other words, while Husserl saw reality as given meaning from individual experiences, Heidegger recognized that humans' shared experiences and traits prohibited objective knowledge and generated shared or common meanings or understandings of the world. Today, the phenomenological researcher is tasked with getting at "the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is particularly relevant in studies "concerned with complexity, process, or novelty" (Smith & Osborne, 2009, p. 55). In this dissertation, I am concerned with each: I want to understand the complexity of connection for teachers in this context; the processes by which they attempted to make connections; and the novelty of doing so in such an emotionally pressurized moment in history. Additionally, because IPA is committed to exploring meaning and sense-making, it serves as a methodology that rejects behaviorism and the kind of objectivist thinking that proliferated in rationalistic and positivistic philosophical and psychological approaches to making sense of the world (Smith & Osborne, 2009). Therefore, an IPA design is more aligned with the relational, care-oriented feminist ideologies of sense making, where experience is embodied and emotion is knowledge

(Forgasz & Clemans, 2014). Given its embrace of abstraction and existentialist philosophical concerns, IPA is an ideal research paradigm for making sense of the emotionally-charged experiences of teachers attempting to connect during a pandemic.

To demonstrate their relevance in studying pandemic experiences, phenomenology and IPA have been used in research on the pandemic teaching and learning experiences. Specifically, Alvarez (2021) undertook a phenomenological analysis of students' lived experiences in the Philippines and found the method's value in listening to students so they can make sense of their own experiences. In a study from the Philippines, Robosa et al. (2021) used IPA to understand teachers' experiences during COVID-19. Their findings demonstrated the sometimes-paradoxical nature of pandemic teaching experiences, where teachers reported being burnt out but also felt fulfillment and joy at times. This focus on the emotional realities of teachers during the pandemic extended beyond IPA but remained firmly in the qualitative realm. Jones and Kessler (2020) recognized the interrelated nature of teachers' care ethics and sense of identity and used their stories to explore the ways in which the pandemic context—which taxed a teachers' capacity to invoke a care ethics—influenced teachers' sense of identity. In a similarly narrative-oriented study, Miller (2021) used reflective journals and asynchronous meetings with teachers to understand the state of relationships in schools during the pandemic. Miller (2021) found that remote teaching left relationships lacking, but also recognized that teachers cultivated care and sought connectivity in various ways.

Beyond IPA and phenomenology, additional qualitative research showed that teachers' experiences during the pandemic were similarly varied. For instance, Klapproth et al. (2020) surveyed 380 teachers in Germany to understand the range of stress levels and sources of stress during distanced teaching. Similarly, Kruszewska et al. (2020), in a study in Poland, surveyed

239 teachers to understand how they coped with distance learning. In yet another qualitative survey, this time of teachers in the United States, Pressley and Ha (2021) found that teachers' sense of self-efficacy was lower during the pandemic compared to previous years. Additionally, several studies from across the world utilized case studies to understand teachers' experiences in different contexts during the pandemic (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Love & Marshall, 2022; Rasmitadila, 2020; Silva et al., 2022). Qualitative findings from these pandemic studies portray the rich tensions and contradictions of individual and collective experiences. As such, I found qualitative design as the ideal approach to understanding the role of connection in teacher's lives during the pandemic.

Research Context

This dissertation study took place at Gateway High School (pseudonym), a secondary school in a public magnet district serving students from a single county in New Jersey. The district is comprised of five career and technical education (CTE) schools, including two larger high schools, two smaller high school academies, and one middle school. One of these two high schools—Gateway High School—was the site for this research. The total enrollment at Gateway High School at the time was approximately 1,000 students. The school's demographics were approximately 16% Asian; 8% Black or African American, 29% White; 43% Hispanic/Latino; with 3% of students identifying as two or more races.

As part of a CTE district, Gateway High School offered specialized career and technical courses in addition to standard academic coursework. The school was divided into academies which focused on career clusters, and students spent a portion of every school day in focused study of their chosen career path. As a public magnet district serving a single county, the school drew their population from various local municipalities and so the population consists of students

who apply to, and are ultimately accepted by Gateway High School. Admission was predicated upon an amalgamation of academic accomplishment and sufficiently demonstrable interest in the relevant areas of career and technical education.

As part of the vocational school movement emerging in the United States in the middle of the 20th century, Gateway High School initially focused on preparing students for work in trades such as plumbing and construction. Rooted thus in the conception of school as a vehicle for developing workers, as the US economy changed, so too did Gateway High School. By 2008, when I began teaching there, the student body had options to study highly technical career fields, including computer programming, architecture, industrial design, as well as the arts. At the time of this study, the students continued to attend CTE courses, however, many also took Advanced Placement (AP) classes in subjects unrelated to their CTE studies. Where once students attended Gateway to ensure a career in the trades, now nearly every student at Gateway goes on to a two- or four-year college.

Teachers at Gateway were ordinarily expected to teach up to six, 42-minute classes per day with one preparation period and one lunch period permitted by contract. As a CTE school, the content areas of courses taught ranged widely from traditional academic subjects such as English, Mathematics, History, and Science to highly-specific, career-related fields such as mechatronics, music production, and culinary arts. It is important to note that Gateway High School was recently relocated from an older facility to a newly-built space in 2018.

Participant Selection

Interpretative phenomenological studies require participants to have direct experience with the phenomena in question. To this end, I selected participants using purposive homogenous sampling to first identify individuals who demonstrated or described experiences attempting to

connect with their students during the pandemic (Smith et al., 2022). I first approached “gatekeepers” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 43) or school administrators and supervisors who were familiar with their teachers’ concerns to elicit referrals for potential participants. With these initial participants identified, I then used snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to expand the sample by asking each new participant to recommend one or two other teachers whom I might recruit given the aims of the study. This sampling approach continued until I reached nine participants, intentionally keeping the group to fewer than ten participants to ensure the sample size was manageable (Boyd, 2001). There were only two requirements for participants to be selected: (1) they must have been actively teaching at Gateway High School; and (2) they should have indicated a concern with or experiences attempting to make connections in the pandemic teaching context. Race, gender, age, years teaching, socioeconomic status, or other identifiers will not be factors in the selection of participants.

Researcher Positionality

In an IPA study, the role of the researcher is acknowledged as part of the “double-hermeneutic,” or the two-stage process of interpreting how the participants make sense of their world as, according to Smith and Osborne (2009), IPA “depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher’s own conceptions” (p. 53). In an effort to ensure the researcher’s existing perspectives are not leading the investigation, it is recommended they “bracket” their experiences. Bracketing is an attempt to elicit a more subjective analysis and is accomplished by the researcher writing down, or clearing out, their own conceptions of the phenomenon (Smith & Osborne, 2009). In doing so, the researcher may more clearly find their way into the experiences of the participants. I elaborate further on my efforts at bracketing in the data analysis section

below. For now, however, it is important to clarify my identity and role as researcher in the context of this study.

At the time of data collection, I was a 40-year old white male who had been teaching English at Gateway High School since 2008. In 2018, I was hired in the position of Teacher-in-Charge, where I worked alongside a school supervisor on a range of initiatives from determining scope and sequence for grade levels to disciplinary issues with teachers and students alike. Despite the responsibilities, this was not a supervisory or administrative role but a teacher leadership position. When this role was eliminated districtwide in 2020, I was reassigned to the position of Educational Coach for the English/Language Arts (ELA) department. In this role, I was responsible for ensuring the cultivation of relevant professional learning communities, worked with my peers as co-practitioner to find ways to improve our individual and collective teaching practices, and functioned as an intermediary for the school's administration and the ELA teachers. Again, this was not a supervisory role, but a teacher leadership position. While I was paid a small stipend for these efforts and my schedule had been reduced by one period, I held no authority over my peers, and conducted no formal observations. Still, it was possible that my position influenced the research to some extent, as the coaching role had proximity to school leadership which may have connotated authority to some teachers. To ensure that my participants and I were approaching the conversations on somewhat equal footing, I made sure to acknowledge early on and throughout the study as needed that I held no authority from the school, and that I was coming to this work as fellow teacher and novice researcher. I address these roles, and the tensions between them, in the section on trustworthiness later in the chapter.

Gathering Data

Data were gathered through a series of bi-weekly group conversations over the course of six months, beginning January 25, 2021 and concluding in June, 2021. We met for a total of nine times, and each meeting lasted approximately one hour. The majority of participants were present for all meetings and remained with the group for the duration of the conversation. Qualitative data were gathered through three sources to aim for triangulation: 1) recordings and transcripts of bi-weekly meetings; 2) reflections and conversations created in a “living” Google Doc; and 3) a researcher’s journal that I maintained as a way of recording my observations and to bracketing my experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Community Conversations

Interviews are the most common method of data gathering for IPA and other phenomenological studies (Byrne, 2001; Giles et al., 2012; Groeneweld, 2004; Smith & Osborne, 2009). One reason for this is the way that interviews reflect the reciprocal nature of phenomenological philosophy as “both researcher and subject are engaged in the dialogue” (Groeneweld, 2004, p. 47). As a form of conversation, interviews are conducive to the participants sharing their experiences in purposeful ways (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA interviews are typically conducted in an individual setting, with the number of total participants interviewed for a study ranging from one to ten (Groeneweld, 2004). In this approach, each interview yields a single case which, when coded and analyzed, yields an essential understanding of the phenomenon in question. However, it has been shown that more complex designs allowing for multiple perspectives can be helpful to understanding nuanced phenomena (Larkin et al., 2018; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Larkin et al. (2018) described different possible design types for multiperspectival IPA research, including directly related groups and indirectly related groups. For this study, I used a multiperspectival approach with a directly related group consisting of

individuals who shared the same general experience of teaching during the pandemic but whose experiences were distinctive (as described by Larkin et al., 2018). The multiperspectival approach supported the dialogic aspect of phenomenological interviews, as participants related their experiences in a way that created practicable space for connection through the group setting. This also supported the development of what Palmer (1998/2017) referred to as a “community of truth” (p. 97).

In an important departure from traditional IPA group interview methods, I intended for this group to function as a community of truth (Palmer 1998/2017). According to Palmer (1998/2017): “The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that *reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it*” (p. 97, author’s italics). The philosophical roots of phenomenology align well with Palmer’s construction. For the phenomenologist, experience is the location of knowledge; for Palmer (1998/2017), the communal experience is the location of reality. In this way, subverting the ordinary group interview and creating a community of truth is directly in line with a phenomenological analysis. Further, as Palmer (1998/2017) wrote, in the community of truth, “there are no pristine objects of knowledge and no ultimate authorities” (p. 104). As such, rather than positioning myself as expert or outsider via the introduction of an interview schedule, I invited the group into a conversation rooted in the common interest and experience of pursuing connections during the pandemic. In this way, I attempted to take on the role of participant-as-observer, where my capacity as researcher was clear but, to the extent possible, “subordinate to [my] researcher’s role as participant” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In keeping with IPA design expectations, the participant group was limited to nine participants to ensure the amount of data was rich yet manageable (Groeneweld, 2004). The

group began meeting in January, 2021, and continued meeting bi-weekly through June, 2021. Meetings were scheduled for at least 45 minutes, but lasted for as long as the participants desired to keep the conversation going, at times going for nearly 90 minutes. Due to the safety restrictions in place during the pandemic and to ensure safety and convenience once restrictions were lowered, all meetings took place virtually. Participants met during an agreed-upon time negotiated during our first meeting, and meeting times occurred during the school day. This was possible due to the modified schedule adopted by the Gateway school district during the 2020–2021 school year. Throughout this study, classes ran on a half-day schedule, concluding at 1:25 p.m., while the teacher work day did not conclude until 3:00 p.m. During the interim between 1:26 p.m. and 3:00 p.m., teachers were expected to work on professional development projects, host office hours, grade, and/or plan for their upcoming lessons. It was during that window of time when our group met to discuss our experiences of connection.

Recording of Meetings

Each meeting was hosted via Google Meet and recorded using Google Meet's recording feature. These recordings were then automatically stored in my school's password-protected Google Drive account. Following each meeting, that recording was immediately downloaded to a folder on my personal laptop, access to which is also protected by a password. Once successfully downloaded, the original recordings were deleted from my school account and only existed on my personal, password-protected device. Each session was then transcribed using otter.ai transcription software services. I selected otter.ai because their transcription software did not claim perfection and therefore required a human listener to review and approve each transcription. This iterative approach not only ensured accuracy in the transcript, but it also aligned with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) suggestion that qualitative researchers familiarize

themselves with the data through repeated views of the transcript. Transcripts were saved in a folder on the same password-protected device as the original recordings. The participants in this study were able to access transcriptions and recordings of each session at their request. As per the Institutional Review Board, these recordings and transcriptions will be stored on this device for three years.

Collaborative Journaling

In addition to our conversations, teachers were invited to record noteworthy experiences, ideas, or concerns related to connection via a shared Google Doc. This shared document was a space for all participants to develop the conversation beyond our agreed-upon time and allowed for us to record in-the-moment reactions to recent experiences. This added layer of data was intended to allow for more robust descriptions of teachers' experiences. It also allowed for more data collection during the weeks in between our scheduled meetings. The Google Doc was shared with all participants' Gateway High School accounts, which were password protected. Only myself and the participants had access to this document.

Researcher Journal

As researcher, I maintained a journal throughout the process which functioned as both self-reflective data and as a measure of trustworthiness where I was able to record and check "my experiences, values, and assumptions" (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 698). The researcher journal also served as a phenomenological bracketing device while coding and analyzing data. Bracketing allowed me to record my own perspectives and experiences in an effort to understand the essence of the phenomenon in a way that was more participant-focused and allowed me to recognize where my experiences influenced my interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this way, too, the researcher journal provided a space for me to reflect upon my experiences as both teacher

and researcher through reflexive writing. As Luttrell (2010) described it, reflexive writing is a way to understand my own emotional and intellectual responses to the experience of teaching during a pandemic. Having a place in which to record and store my experiences helped me to bracket my experiences in order to pursue the “pure subjectivity” of the phenomenological method (Groeneweld, 2004).

Data Analysis

The goal of IPA research is to uncover “meaningful revelations [which] must be originary and existentially compelling to the soul” (van Manen, 2017, p. 779). As such, phenomenological data analysis does not lend itself easily to “simplistic schemes, superficial programs, [or] step-by-step procedures” (van Manen, 2017, p. 779). Still, there must be a systematic approach to analysis, and in keeping with the bespoke nature of this study’s design, I analyzed the data following a patchwork of analytic methods to ensure that the findings were “existentially compelling.”

To begin, I transcribed each conversation from the group from each week using otter.ai software in order to ensure accuracy and as a means of re-immersing myself in the data. As I transcribed, I noted common concerns and ideas as they appeared in this initial pass of the data. I also used bracketing and phenomenological reduction after each transcription review, in an attempt to temporarily set aside my own presuppositions about the data and to examine my own biases and assumptions. This was a necessary step of phenomenological reduction so that I could approach the phenomenon more openly—not to negate my own experiences, but to attempt to follow the phenomenon to its own meanings based on the experiences of the participants (Groeneweld, 2004).

After this initial sorting for preliminary understandings of meaning, I pursued a more exact understanding of the individual participants' experiences by creating unique transcripts of each participant's data, including both discussion contributions and additions to the shared Google Doc. This individual approach supported IPA's case-making design, where typically interviews yield cases from which the researcher synthesizes essence (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Having isolated a single transcript for each participant, I made notes for individual cases which would support my understanding of their experiences. This case-making design also allowed me to conduct validity checks with participants, wherein I shared their individual perspectives for verification and clarification.

With the data thus validated and initial themes emerging from individuals, I moved towards establishing a composite description of themes across the group. In order to accomplish this, I utilized both my initial group notes and individual experiences to discern themes across participants. I took an iterative approach similar to the constant comparative method, sorting through each week's conversation and each individual's transcript, attempting to locate the essence of connection through a systematic process. As I worked, I used horizontalization which, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), is the process of "laying out all the data for examination" (p. 27), giving equal weight and value to each piece initially, before organizing the data into clusters of meaning. From here, I began to shape these clusters into thematic forms, moving iteratively between the interview data and emerging themes in order to understand the essence of the phenomenon. As van Manen (2017) warned, this was difficult, abstract work. Still, it was the method most suited to my goal of understandings in a deep and lasting way the experience of teachers attempting to make connections during the pandemic (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). In the next section, I conduct an independent audit which both further elucidates my data analysis process and supports the trustworthiness of this study.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I incorporated several standard qualitative research practices as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). These included triangulations, whereby I established three different sources of data including: our group conversations; collaborative writing via Google Doc; and my own researcher journal. Additionally, I conducted member checks to ensure that my initial interpretations “rang true” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 238) to the participants, thereby validating my interpretations and rendering my findings more reliable. A third approach to trustworthiness was my own reflexivity, which not only supported my efforts at triangulation, but also aligned with the IPA practice of bracketing my experiences, thoughts, and beliefs, in an attempt to elicit a more subjective analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

However, perhaps the most effective way to demonstrate how I approached these traditional aspects of trustworthiness requires a brief description of elements of IPA methodology, which may be unfamiliar to education researchers as it is primarily used in psychological settings (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Data analysis in an IPA study is a systematic process that typically includes several steps: reading and re-reading; exploratory noting; formulating experiential statements; and clustering experiential themes (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This systematic approach is one way to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Another, powerful approach to establishing trustworthiness and supporting validity in an IPA study is the independent audit. Accordingly, to ensure the trustworthiness of this dissertation, I briefly conducted an independent audit to support my findings in this dissertation.

The independent audit is a process designed to “help enhance confidence in the validity in qualitative research” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 153) and is particularly useful in IPA studies. Although an independent audit is designed to be “hypothetical or virtual” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 153), the aim is to describe the data collection or analysis process “in such a way that somebody could follow the chain of evidence that leads from initial documentation through to the final report” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 153). Similar to Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) “audit trail” (p. 259), the independent audit is a detailed account of the data collection and analysis process. As I have already described the data collection process above, I now provide an independent audit of the data analysis portion of this project.

Data analysis began when I uploaded the first transcript to the otter.ai software and reviewed the transcript for accuracy. Reviewing the transcript for accuracy meant simultaneously listening to and reading the words of the participants on the transcribed document. Doing this required me to pause and reflect often, as I attempted to discern a word or phrase, bringing me up close to the data. As I reviewed each transcript, I made loose, preliminary notes in the margins as a way of engaging in pre-analysis. Smith et al. (2022) referred to this step as “reading and re-reading” (p. 78) and it is a way of re-entering the world of the data.

Step two of the process was the first pass of “exploratory noting” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 79) which examined “semantic content and language use on a very exploratory basis” (p. 79). Notably, IPA research typically focuses on interview data from individual cases. Given the polyphonic nature of our group discussion, I initially considered each week’s transcript to be a single “case,” and my exploratory noting focused on instances of possible connection or disconnection as they arose during the group conversation. My goal was to explore the data and begin to mark moments of phenomenological importance. I repeated this process for each

transcript from January 25 through June 6, and I would frequently write in my bracketing notebook either prior to the start of or immediately following exploratory noting.

Once I completed the exploratory noting for each meeting transcript, I then created individual cases for each participant by compiling each participant's individual contributions to all transcripts into a single case document for each person. Each participant's case document was subdivided by the meeting date and included my original exploratory noting. Creating individual cases from the group transcript allowed me to focus ideographically on each individual's contributions and experiences while still keeping the value of the larger group's contributions in the backdrop. Isolating individual cases allowed me to hear their individual experiences and understand them on their own terms which allowed me to begin developing an understanding of their unique beliefs and experiences and to see how they converged or diverged with those of the group. With each participant's case now separated on its own, I repeated my exploratory note-making to focus on the individuals. This was an important step to prepare for an accurate member check.

Individualizing the transcript cases allowed me to more easily conduct member checks. Following the exploratory noting of each individual's case, I made a copy of each participant's case (which included my notes). I then emailed each participant individually with a request to review and confirm that the data collected and my preliminary analysis "rang true" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 238). Only participant Bruce had concerns about my interpretation on a single point, and we discussed his perspective until he was satisfied that I understood him. With this clarification and approval from the other members of the group, I then moved on to the next step of formulating experiential themes.

In order to formulate experiential statements, I returned to the exploratory notes on each participant's individual case document and copied them to a spreadsheet. Each spreadsheet consisted of all highlighted quotes, transcript dates, and page numbers, alongside my initial exploratory notes. The process of moving from exploratory note to experiential statement is designed to "produce a concise and pithy summary" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 97) of each exploratory note so as to move towards a more abstract or conceptual understanding of the experience. Unlike exploratory notes, which are preliminary notes of interpretation, experiential statements aimed to "reduce the volume of detail . . . while maintaining complexity" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 86).

With experiential statements completed for each exploratory note, I then reviewed and refined each of them with the goal of "putting like with like, distilling, synthesizing, and identifying a structure that can bring them together" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 43). This meant moving further in abstract or conceptual understanding so that I could then cluster the experiential statements by theme for each individual. At this point, an example helps illustrate what this process looked like.

One quote from the data was, "when I see [the student's] faces, that's when I'm invested, that's when I'm feeling that push to go above and beyond" (Bruce, May 3, p. 10). My exploratory note was "Seeing students energizes BB and invigorates his practice." The experiential statement for this was "student engagement and connection is invigorating," which led to the clustered theme "tensions in hybrid teaching: connections and disconnections." I hope the reader can see how I moved from Bruce's original statement about student investment to a more exploratory note about energy and vigor before seeing that "connection is invigorating." Ultimately, I included this data point under the clustered theme "tensions in hybrid teaching" as I

sought both convergences and divergences in clustering themes: the invigorating nature of connection stood in contrast with more negative experiences described by other participants in regards to hybrid teaching. As with other aspects of the methodology, thematic clustering took multiple iterations of grouping and compiling, as I continually moved the data around in the spreadsheet to determine “what should go with what” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 43).

Having clustered personal experiential statements (PESs), I then moved on to seeking group experiential themes (GETs). To this end, I once again conducted multiple reviews of each participants’ personal experiential themes (PETs) and clustered themes, seeking convergences and divergences that would yield commonalities (however abstract) across the group. To ensure this was done systematically, I created another spreadsheet to record the emerging GETs. This spreadsheet included individual quotes and transcript pages, but also included another level of analytical and organizational notes to help make sense of the group’s experiences (Smith et al., 2022). For example, a column for “group theme notes/analytical notes” is where I began making analytical notes in preparation of my findings; a column for “subthemes/taxonomy” supported more granular organization of each GET and helped me see variations within an experience; and the larger GET column provided a thematic orientation point for the subthemes overall relevant data points.

Once a clear image of the various group themes emerged from the data, I began writing. This, too, was part of the data analysis process, as I attempted to articulate the group themes and relevant individual experiences in ways that accurately reflected the experiences of individuals and the group. This meant returning to the data frequently and revisiting the spreadsheets of PETs and GETs and remaining open to changing those documents and my own mind as I began to find nuances in the themes through writing.

The IPA data-analysis process was systematic and expansive, yet it was also intuitive and flexible (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Following this process, I saw the data evolve from a transcript of a conversation among peers to a series of elaborate but organized spreadsheets that made sense of the data in a systematic way. The IPA data analysis process in itself is a kind of triangulation. Each phase required me to check my thinking against the previous step, which required reflexivity from me as researcher throughout the process. The process began with the creation of an accurate group transcript from which I could isolate individual experiences to both explore the data more intimately and to make for simple but thorough member checks. Once the individual accounts were verified, the creation of personal experiential statements (PETs) yielded group experiential statements (GETs) from clustered themes of rich, convergent and divergent data. During this process I frequently returned to my researcher journal—both to reflect on ideas and to bracket my experiences where necessary—and reviewed the collaborative journal document created by the group to check for additional data points or to more fully understand experiences. All told, the IPA methodology grounded my data analysis in a systematic approach which ensured trustworthiness. Having established trustworthiness in my methodology, in the next chapter, I turn to the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

This dissertation study set out to understand teachers' experiences of connection during the COVID-19 pandemic during the second half of the 2020–2021 school year. This work was guided by the following research questions: (1) How did teachers experience human connection during a pandemic? (1a) What kinds of connection did teachers experience with students, peers, and administrators in this context? (1b) What practices did teachers employ in pursuit of connection with students, peers, and administrators in this context? (1c) What meanings did teachers make from these experiences?

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the COVID-19 pandemic setting from onset through the start of this study. I also provide for the reader the status of schools and relevant breakthroughs around vaccines at the time of the study. This section also includes definitions for terminology that was prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic context and is relevant to this study. The setting also includes a brief re-introduction of the participants. Following the setting, I move into the thematic findings, which are grouped around language taken from the participants: “The Wall of Disconnection;” “That Wall Will Come Down;” and “Start Listening.” Taken together, the findings represent the range of complexities teachers experienced in pursuit of connection during the second spring of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Setting

The 2020–2021 school year began amid the turmoil of both the COVID-19 pandemic and a contentious 2020 presidential election. The political climate was so charged that, due to rhetoric of incumbent President Donald Trump, fears of violence and voter intimidation proliferated in the days leading up to the November 2020 election, although violent acts were never realized (Westphal, 2021). In December, 2020, it was announced that Donald Trump lost

the election, yet he refused to concede to President-elect Joseph R. Biden, despite clear and irrefutable evidence. Trump's agitation of his supporters and adamant denial of the results continued for weeks, culminating on January 6th, 2021, when a mob of pro-Trump supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol in an effort to thwart the election certification process. On that day, hundreds of pro-Trump supporters stormed the Capitol Building and violently disrupted the certification of the electoral counts (U. S. House of Representatives, 2022). The attack on the Capitol, which left several people dead and over one hundred wounded, ultimately reflected a deep political divide that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mordecai & Connaughton, 2020).

The attack on the US Capitol was on the minds of the participants in this study when the group logged on to meet for the first time on January 25, 2021. The group would go on to meet approximately eight more times throughout the rest of the school year and once the following fall as a follow-up. Politics were ubiquitous during this study, and led to tensions in and around teachers' classrooms. Particularly after the Black Lives Matter reckoning which took place following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery during the spring of 2020, teachers had been exposed to more complex conversations around teaching about racism in the classroom. The teachers in this study shared concerns about even mentioning the political realities of the day—from the January 6th insurrection to Black History Month projects—and these worries manifested in their pursuit of connection and influenced their teaching practice. Still, educators were and have historically been expected to avoid taking political stances (Freire, 1970/2017; Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1994). This idea was perpetuated in the hyperconnected virtual teaching space, where parents and guardians are able to peer directly into the classroom. As such, whether or not to address the politics of the day became a highly conscientious decision for some

teachers. This was further exacerbated by a movement amongst some parents whose frustration with New Jersey school districts' instructional decisions and mask mandates riled them to the point of protest (Johnson & Arco, 2021). Although specific to the pandemic context, these instances follow a longer trending distrust of American institutions over time, aimed specifically at public schools and teachers, which threatens to undermine American democracy (Berliner & Hermanns, 2022).

It was against this backdrop of political uncertainty and hyperconnection during the pandemic that I felt compelled to study teachers experiences of connection. The world at this time felt, to me, deeply fractured. The emotional toll of months of isolation, paired with my own tendencies for clinical depression and anxiety, spurred me to understand the world beyond my experiences. There was something intriguing about the context. Early in the pandemic, Ravitch (2020) proposed a flux pedagogy to “help educators to examine the goals and processes of schooling in this moment of extreme uncertainty” (p. 3), aiming for a radical reinvention of teaching and learning. I, too, felt that the pandemic could be a valuable, potentially radical opportunity for change. As much as I wanted a return to a safer, more familiar time, I was simultaneously curious about the individual and collective experiences of other teachers during the pandemic and how we might learn from each other. I presumed that I was not alone in my emotional experiences, and my instincts were true: when I sent an email to staff at the Gateway district seeking participants for a study on human connection, I quickly found nine participants. That rapid response told me that a study of human connection was worth pursuing in this fractious, contentious social and political context. To be sure, a study of human connection is a worthy topic under any circumstances and has garnered study by researchers from a range of academic areas from evolutionary biology to cognitive neuroscience (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008;

Christakis, 2019). Put simply: I wanted to see how other teachers kept from feeling alone, even as they were isolated in so many ways during the pandemic.

As it happened, studying teachers' experiences of connection during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed me to make connections at a time when I was incredibly lonely. It also allowed me to understand the world in a more empathetic way and, in turn, may therefore help teachers, school leaders, parents, and researchers understand something about not only what it was like to teach connectedly during pandemic, but also about the heart of teachers' work. In the section below, I elaborate on the complexities of the pandemic teaching context to evoke the nuances of the time and the challenges of the work attempted by these teachers. I aim to carefully describe not only what it looked like in our virtual meetings, but what was happening in our school and in the world around us in the time leading up to—and during—the study. In this way, I hope to create a clear backdrop for understanding the thematic findings that arose in the data, which I describe in detail later in the chapter.

I begin with a brief review of the state of the COVID-19 pandemic up to and including the time of this study, including how state and local decisions to preserve the safety of students and teachers influenced the efforts of the participants in this research project. Following this, I describe the digital space of our meetings in an attempt to capture a place that was never physically shared. Afterwards, I describe the participants in an effort to remind the reader of the humans at the heart of this project before moving into the larger themes found in the data.

The Pandemic Context: A Timeline of COVID-19 through September 2020

The setting of this study focuses on the experiences of teachers during the 2020–2021 school year, specifically the period between January 25, 2021, through June 6, 2021. In order to fully understand those experiences in a larger context, we must first recognize the historical

setting of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following paragraphs, I review the onset of COVID-19 in the US and its ensuing effect in order to provide larger context for the experiences described by the teachers in this study. In this section, I also provide state and local timelines in the months leading up to the study, in order to situate the Gateway district's approach to teaching and learning in the first full school-year with COVID-19.

On January 20, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in the United States was confirmed by a laboratory in Washington. COVID-19, a novel coronavirus that had emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, spread quickly across the world. By early February, 2020, just over 1,000 people had died from the virus worldwide; within a month that number would increase to nearly 4,300 deaths and the WHO would declare COVID-19 a pandemic (CDC timeline). By mid-March, 2020, the largest public-school system in the United States—the New York City public school system—would shut down. Around this time, on March 15, 2020, the Gateway school district also shuttered for the safety of the community, moving to an all-virtual learning model. By then, official travel restrictions were in place in the US, limiting physical access to much of the world (US Department of Defense, n. d.). Professional and collegiate sports organizations such as the National Basketball Association, National Hockey League, and the National Collegiate Athletics Association cancelled or paused their seasons by the end of March, 2020. At the same time, Governor Murphy released stay-at-home orders directly and indirectly shuttering nearly all of New Jersey's museums, restaurants, libraries, clothing stores, dance halls, yoga studios, churches, mosques and synagogues (Erminio, 2020). By April 5, 2020, COVID-19 had infected 37,505 New Jerseyans, 917 of whom had died (Erminio, 2020); globally, the number of cases reached over 1,000,000, approximately 400,000 of which came from the US (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, n. d.)

In early May, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy announced that schools and colleges across the state would remain closed for the remainder of the school year (State of New Jersey, 2020). Later that same month, Governor Murphy unveiled a multi-staged plan titled “The Road Back: Moving Forward Cautiously” which outlined levels of restrictions on various activities and guidelines for how to return to “the new normal” (Arco & Napoliello, 2020). At the time of that report’s release, Governor Murphy indicated that NJ was in “Stage 1” of the re-opening process, and some restrictions around low-risk activities were relaxed. More specifically, state and county parks—including beaches—were now open with social distancing guidelines and an indoor masking requirement for public places.

At the end of that same month, on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd, an African-American man, was handcuffed by a white police officer who then knelt on his neck until Mr. Floyd perished. His murder was witnessed by a crowd of onlookers and caught on video that was shared widely on social media; the video led to protests in Minneapolis and around the U.S. that same night (Taylor, 2021). Soon, the murder of George Floyd sparked massive protests around the globe in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, with estimates of millions of supporters agitating for criminal justice reform after the killings of other Black Americans that year, specifically Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020). The conversations around criminal justice and racism resulting from this reckoning would factor into the experiences of the teachers in this study, approximately one year later. Interestingly, three weeks after the late-May and early-June protests, researchers found no evidence that the large gatherings led to spikes in the spread of COVID-19 (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, n. d.).

In addition to the protests in early June, New Jersey began moving into “Stage 2” that month, where further restrictions would be lifted, including outdoor dining in restaurants and the re-opening of so-called “nonessential retail stores” along with hair salons and barbershops, gyms and fitness clubs, libraries, museums, and day care centers (Johnson, 2020a). Notably, each of these openings came with some restrictions, including operating at 50% capacity, mandated masking indoors, and maintaining safe social distancing (Johnson, 2020b).

The summer of 2020, leading up to the 2020–2021 school year, was marked by contentious conversations around how to safely return teachers and students to schools in September. Republican President Donald Trump, for instance, tweeted “SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!” on July 6, 2020 (The American Presidency Project, n. d.). Meanwhile, merely days later, Claxton et al. (2020) released a report that found about 1.5 million teachers were at risk of serious disease if they contracted COVID-19. And yet, around that same time, Governor Murphy announced that summer school could take place in person (Johnson, 2020b). Tensions rose as parents, politicians, and teacher unions clashed in their views of how to safely return to school, with teachers’ unions often bearing the blame for school closures as they advocated for safety standards (Will, 2020). As reported by Goldstein and Shapiro (2020), unions attempted to protect teachers who were doing virtual work during emergency remote teaching to avoid them beyond their contract hours as they attempted to function in a new classroom paradigm. Goldstein and Shapiro (2020) also noted that satisfying parental expectations at this time—expectations which ranged widely from the paradoxical cultural belief that teachers were doing too much and doing too little—exacerbated the challenge of teaching during the pandemic.

In August, when New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio announced a partial re-opening plan, teachers brought coffins and guillotines to protest the decision to return to school (Rosner & Lapin, 2020). In New Jersey, Governor Murphy backed down from an initial stance requiring schools to open, and instead offered a similar plan to New York City, which allowed for an all-virtual return to school, so long as districts outlined their reasons. Rather than providing a clear-cut, universal plan for all of New Jersey's schools, the state made "recommendations for public schools rather than mandatory standards, with the exception of the mandatory masking requirement for all individuals" (New Jersey Department of Education & New Jersey Department of Health, p. 3; 2021). This plan drew the ire of leaders of the state's administrators, principals and teachers' associations, who penned a joint letter asking for adequate funding to plan for an all-virtual remote start to the school year and to address the rampant inequities in resources found across the nearly 600 individual school districts in New Jersey (New Jersey Association of School Administrators, n. d.). Newark, NJ, Mayor Ras Baraka went so far as to say, "I would advise everybody to keep their children home from school" (Tully, 2020). At the same time, COVID-19 became the third leading cause of death in the United States, where deaths from the disease exceeded 1,000 per day with over 5.4 million cases tallied nationwide (Center for Disease Control & Prevention). It was a tumultuous time to be a teacher.

While this study took place during the second half of the 2020–2021 school year, it is important that readers understand what happened in the year leading up to this study. In the section above, I briefly described a timeline of events that relate to the experiential themes from the data, and which help create a believable and therefore trustworthy setting for the study. In the next sub-section, I further define the setting by describing the Gateway School District's response to Governor Murphy's recommendations, including a review of the proposed plans at

the state and district level and delineating specific terminology to more thoroughly and reliably evoke the teachers' experiences.

The Pandemic Context: Framing the 2020–2021 School Year

Following the recommendations of Governor Phil Murphy, in September, 2020, the Gateway School District released a 5-phase, hybrid-learning plan for the 2020–2021 school year. The five phases of the plan were designed to culminate in a full-time return to school. In this section, I describe the phases proposed by the district for this school year, followed by a brief outline of the major pandemic-related events that occurred during the study. Taken together, these sections render a faithful image of the larger context for the study's setting.

The Gateway School District released their Restart Plan in July, 2020, and updated it again in September 2020 to comply with the evolving recommendations of the Governor, NJ State Department of Education, and local input (Restart Plan, 2020). According to the district's plan, these decisions were arrived at with the support of a comprehensive Restart Committee that included "parents, teachers, school nurse, administrators, support staff, students and board members" (Restart Plan, p. 2). The Restart Plan outlined a schedule for both students and staff and included conditions for learning which outlined safety measures for a range of facilities in the district.

As per the Student Re-Entry Plan, Phase One was expected to last for the first 10 weeks of school and would see 25% of students report for in-person instruction one day per week while remaining home on virtual instruction during the other four days (for a total five days per week of instruction). Presuming low case counts and relative safety, after ten weeks the school would move on to Phase Two, which would see 50% of students return to campus for two days of in-person learning while remaining home for virtual instruction for three days. Phase Three would

then see 75% of students for three days of in-person learning and two days at-home for virtual learning. Phase Four would have 100% of students in-person for four days with one day of virtual learning. Phase Five would see a return to 100% of students in-person five days per week. Reaching Phase Five would signify a return to the so-called new normal and indicated that life would look more like it did pre-pandemic. Importantly, for all five phases, the ReEntry Plan stated that individual class time had been reduced from the pre-pandemic standard of 42 minutes per period to shortened 25-minute periods of instruction. Students would be dismissed at 1:30 pm each day, so that teachers could hold office hours for one-on-one meetings or attend professional development workshops through their contracted hours until 3:00 p.m.

An important aspect of the Re-Entry Plan is that all families were given the option to start school in either the phased-in, hybrid plan or to forego in-person classroom time and opt for a full-time virtual learning model. Compared with the hybrid option above, the virtual model was more straightforward: virtual learners would attend all of their classes via Google Meet until the next opt-in period near the end of the grading term. Interestingly, this same level of flexibility was not offered to the teachers. Unlike their pupils, teachers were expected to be in their classrooms four days per week during Phases One through Four, teaching just one day per week from home in a virtual learning environment. This decision would factor into the participants experiences throughout the project, as teachers were expected to be on-campus unless otherwise given permission to work from home.

Just two months into the 2020–2021 school year, a sharp rise in COVID-19 case counts forced the district to move all students and staff to an all-virtual learning environment by mid-November, 2020 (District Email). Students and teachers were sent home for virtual learning for a second time in nine months. This time, teachers would remain at home from November, 2020,

until March, 2021; no students would return to campus until late April, 2021. When this study began on January 25, 2021, all students and teachers were in a virtual learning environment. They had been away from campus for over two months.

During the timeframe of this study, there were several major developments related to the virus and the social realities of the pandemic. On January 20, 2021, the US marked the anniversary of the first laboratory-confirmed case of COVID-19 in the US and had since seen 24,000,000 COVID-19 infections in America (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, n. d.). However, by that same date, approximately 13,600,000 Americans had been inoculated against the initial strain of COVID-19 with at least one dose of the newly-approved vaccine (Westcott, et al., 2021). And yet, even as the number of vaccinated people rose that winter, providing a form of hope, mutations of COVID-19 known as “variants” spread around the globe. Throughout the winter and spring of 2021, when this study took place, some restrictions lifted and vaccines began to roll out. For schools specifically, promising changes took place: in early March, President Biden directed states to prioritize vaccine eligibility for teachers, school staff, and childcare workers; by April, the CDC estimated that 80% of teachers (pre-k–12), school staff, and childcare workers had at least one dose of the vaccine (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, n. d.). In New Jersey, many of the previous years’ restrictions were eased and official recommendations for indoor gatherings allowed for more people to safely be together again; by May, mask mandates in public spaces were relaxed (Erminio, 2020).

The setting of this study provides the foundation for the major themes in the teachers’ experiences, as changes in the pandemic restrictions echoed evolving learning environments which became a source of uncertainty, frustration, and isolation for the participants. One prominent theme was a loss of professional autonomy and a desire by teachers to reclaim their

practice, which was exacerbated by the perpetually changing teaching context. During this study, teachers experienced three distinctive teaching contexts: virtual-at-home, virtual-on-campus, and hybrid, which I define in the next subsection. Adapting to such changes and the attending sense of diminished autonomy reflected larger concerns expressed by teachers, unions, and administrators throughout the pandemic (Will, 2020; Tully, 2020; Goldstein & Shapiro, 2020). In the next section, I describe the nuances of the virtual and hybrid classroom setting as enacted by the Gateway district, so the reader can understand more fully the experiences of the teachers in this study.

Being There: Virtual and Hybrid Settings

As noted above, the Gateway district devised an approach to teaching and learning during the 2020–2021 school year in accordance with state recommendations. Gateway High School created three distinctive settings in which teachers worked during this study: virtual-at-home, virtual-on-campus, and hybrid. It is important to reinforce here that, of those three settings, only teachers experienced virtual-on-campus. Students' choices were limited to virtual-at-home or hybrid learning models. However, teachers were not given a choice about where to teach from; their directives came from the district and school administrators. In this section, I describe in detail the distinctions between the three main settings—virtual-at-home, virtual-on-campus, and hybrid—in which teachers worked during this study, so that the practical requirements and complexities of each setting can be more fully understood by the reader. In this way, I aim to build on the trustworthiness of the data by fully describing the setting in detail.

Virtual-At-Home. The virtual-at-home setting was similar to emergency remote teaching in that both teachers and students were off-campus and using videoconferencing software (i.e., Google Meet) to deliver instruction and a digital learning management system (i.e., Google

Classroom) to host course materials, have online discussions, and provide students with feedback and grades. The virtual-at-home setting meant that both teachers and students were working off-campus, presumably at their homes or somewhere safe and with a reliable internet connection. During this study, the virtual-at-home setting was adopted by Gateway in November 2020, approximately two months before the study began, and continued into the spring thereby lasting around four months or nearly half of the school year.

Teaching virtually-at-home meant that teachers were at home as they worked which, as many newly-remote workers learned, meant balancing the multiple roles they played in their relationships with others. For example, teachers who were also caretakers or parents had to do the emotional work of tending to their students during class time and ensuring their loved ones and children were given the attention that they needed. Additionally, an important distinction in virtual-at-home teaching and emergency remote teaching was the expectation of synchronous instruction.

For the purposes of this study, I define synchronous instruction as a teacher facilitating interactive online instruction to students in the digital classroom space (i.e., Google Classroom) (Ward et al., 2010). Following this definition and the instructions from the Gateway district, during synchronous instruction, students and teachers were expected to have their cameras on and engage with one another as if they were in a physical classroom. This expectation proved to be troublesome, if not idealistic, as teachers learned that their students could or would not be able to consistently participate the way they would in the classroom. Restrictions on student participation ranged from busy, multi-family households that were inconducive to verbal contribution or a shared setting where having a camera on would distract the class. Conversely, asynchronous instruction took place when teachers and students remained offline but used the

learning management software as a space to work independent of one another on their own time. For instance, asynchronous instruction may have had a teacher post a video lecture paired with reflection questions via the learning management system. The teacher would then leave instructions for students to view the video on their own time and submit their reflection questions by an appointed date/time. This approach left little room for group or individual interactions, but provided space for students to work at their own pace.

Virtual-On-Campus. Virtual-on-campus teaching occurred twice during the 2020–2021 school year: for two weeks in September, 2020, and for two weeks in March, 2021. Virtual-on-campus teaching required teachers to be present on-campus, teaching from their classrooms while students remained at home for virtual learning (or, virtual-at-home). Whereas virtual-at-home teaching provided the unique challenge of balancing multiple identities and responsibilities, virtual-on-campus teaching uprooted the teacher from the comparative safety of their household and required them to be accounted for in the school building.

In my review of the various gradual re-entry plans released by the Gateway district, it was suggested that virtual-on-campus teaching aligned with NJDOE recommendations. However, I was unable to locate any policy or recommendation at the time from NJDOE explicitly calling for teachers to be in schools without students. Further review of the plans released by the district throughout the school year did not yield any concrete rationale for the decision to require teachers to be present on-site during virtual learning. While there was value in students and teachers returning to shared physical classrooms in order to support learning and social emotional needs (Sheikh et al., 2020), I was unable locate literature finding a benefit to having teachers alone in classrooms while their pupils remained in the virtual realm.

Hybrid. The hybrid learning model adopted at Gateway consisted of a combination of on-site and virtual-at-home learning. In this model, students would receive the typical five days of instruction per week, with the location rotating: one day would be on-site school instruction followed by four days of virtual-at-home instruction. Initially conceived to allow maximum student participant while maintaining safety guidelines, the hybrid model followed the state recommendations to assure a gradual return to campus for all students. Again, parents were given the option to choose whether to send their student to campus one day per week or remain virtual all five days.

Various versions of the hybrid model were adopted in several places around the US during the 2020–2021 school year, perhaps most notably and contentiously in the New York City public school system (Rosner & Lapin, 2020; Shapiro, 2020). In New York City and at Gateway, the hybrid model proved to be a logistical challenge for administrators and teachers, as classrooms now existed in two very difference places, simultaneously adding extra burdens on teachers (Belsha, 2020). Teachers in the hybrid setting had to attend to the unique demands and challenges of a synchronous virtual classroom (e.g., distracted students, cameras turned off, and lack of engagement) while also being present for the students physically in the room with them (Tully, 2020). Additionally, teachers in the building during the early part of the school year had to contend with the reality that COVID-19 was still circulating and, in September, no vaccine was readily available. Masking and social distancing were mitigating measures and part of a complex series of interventions that would reduce spread but not entire prevent the possibility of infection (Escandon et al., 2021). This lent an element of danger to the hybrid model for some teachers who feared for their health and safety around returning to school (Heubeck, 2020). For

the Gateway school district, the goal of the hybrid model was to begin moving towards a full-time, in-person learning model (District Plan).

Teaching in three very different settings required teachers to adapt their practices in novel ways throughout the school year. As the data showed, teachers' approaches to and experiences with adapting practices supported some connections among the participants in the study. However, the overall effect of the changes resounded on a more emotional level. The turmoil experienced by these educators as they moved from virtual-at-home to virtual-on-campus to hybrid learning in the second half of the school year revealed the extent to which the study's evolving settings were a source of disconnection for these teachers. I explore this, and other themes, in the sections that follow. Prior to this, in order to more clearly articulate the participants' identities and experiences, I now turn to a brief reintroduction of the teachers.

Participants

From one perspective, you could say that this study took place in the classrooms and living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, cars, basements and home offices of the nine participants, which is to say, it took place wherever the participants and I happened to be during our virtual meeting times. Our gathering space was digital, and from afar we found community via Google Meets, the videoconferencing platform adopted by our school district for virtual teaching and learning. We met this way beginning on January 25, 2021, and continued to meet for a total of nine times—approximately every other week—until June 7, 2021. We met one final time (also virtually) on October 19, 2021, to follow-up and check-in with one another. Ironically, despite the study's focus on connection, at no point were my participants and I ever together as a whole group in the same physical space. As I hope is clear from the pandemic setting descriptions above, this is largely due to the restrictions imposed by the school district to avoid spreading and

contracting COVID-19. Beyond those restrictions, however, we were also respectful of one another's individual boundaries: when a vaccine became available, and as our collective comfort levels with returning to public life started to rise, we still agreed to meet virtually. For my part as researcher, this allowed me to maintain consistency in my data collection efforts. For my part as a human, I wished we could have been in the same room with one another, even just once. Still, we each experienced the world in unique ways, and the purpose of convening this group was to understand the experiences of educators in pursuit of connection during the pandemic.

Bruce

Bruce was a young, male English teacher who self-identified as a first-generation, Asian-American immigrant and considered himself a member of the lower-middle class. In his early twenties at the time of this study, Bruce had taught English at Gateway High School for three years. Prior to joining Gateway, he taught English for one year at a suburban high school in a different part of New Jersey. A native to the Gateway area, Bruce lived in the same city as many of his students and shared an ethnic and cultural identity with many as well.

Caroline

Caroline self-identified as a thirty-three-year-old, middle-class Hispanic female who was working towards a Master's degree in Math Education at the time of this study. Like several other participants, Caroline had prior teaching experience outside Gateway High School, having taught math for two years at a nearby high school.

Cynthia

Cynthia self-identified as a female, Asian teacher of mathematics. During this study, she taught geometry and algebra to freshmen and sophomores. As she was initially hired at Gateway High School for the 2019–2020 school year, her experiences in the district were largely informed

by the pandemic. Prior to joining the staff at Gateway, Cynthia taught math for nine years at another nearby high school, in the same community in which she lived during this study. She was mother to a toddler and a step-son who attended Gateway High School during this study.

Jennifer

Jennifer self-identified as a middle-class, Asian/Filipino-American, cisgender female. Jennifer taught Geometry and Algebra to freshmen and sophomores, was thirty years old, and making progress towards a Master's degree at the time of this study. Notably, Jennifer was a Gateway High School alumnus, a status which she believed to factor into her experiences with, and conceptualizations of, human connection during this study.

Kelly

Kelly identified as a heterosexual Caucasian female of Irish, Italian, and Polish descent. As a child, Kelly grew up in poverty in a small city nearby Gateway High School. After losing her parents at a young age, Kelly was raised by her grandparents but legally considered a ward of the state; at the time of this study, she estimated being closer to the lower-middle class. At the time of this study, Kelly held a Bachelor's degree, which she noted was financed with federal assistance. Kelly had been teaching English and theater at Gateway High School for seventeen years at the time of this study.

Roy

Roy self-identified as a fifty-nine-year-old, middle-class, African-American male. He held a Master's degree and four New Jersey education certifications, as well as various industry-related certifications. Often referring to himself as "the senior member" of the group, Roy had been teaching at Gateway High School for twenty-four years at the time of this study. In addition to teaching at Gateway, Roy was also a professional musician and adjunct college professor.

Ryan

Ryan described himself as “a white male of middling stature” and a member of the middle class. He held a Master’s degree in American History, which was also the subject area he taught. He taught in the Gateway school district for, according to him, about fourteen years in various schools and programs.

Sophia

Sophia self-identified as a twenty-four-year-old Hispanic/Latino female from the middle socioeconomic class who had earned a Master’s degree. At the time of this study, Sophia had taught math and physics at Gateway High School for two years, having some prior experience teaching at another regional high school.

Yessica

Yessica self-identified as a female, Hispanic, millennial teacher. At the time of this study, she was in her third year as an English teacher at Gateway, having taught sophomores for all three years. Prior to teaching at Gateway, Yessica also taught English and Special Education classes in two other districts in the state. She was in her seventh year of teaching overall at the time of this study.

The teachers in this study brought a range of experience levels and content area expertise. More precisely, the study comprised of four English teachers (including myself), four math teachers (one of whom also teaches science), one history teacher, and one music teacher. Our collective years of experience ranged from two to twenty-five, with most teachers falling somewhere near ten years of experience. We had differing perspectives on how and why to pursue connection with students but, in the end, we were all there to understand something about ourselves and our world during this incredibly tumultuous time. In the section that follows, I use

the teachers' voices to evoke the experience of pursuing connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organized thematically, the following findings represent instances of common and collective experiences shared by the participants. Understanding these teachers' experiences can tell us something about what it was like to pursue connection in an isolated and disconnected time, which may ultimately reveal something essential about what it means to teach, to learn, and to be a human.

Thematic Findings

There is a wall between teachers and students. And that wall is going to be maintained if they don't feel that you can be humanized. If you can show that you're a real person, that wall will come down, and then they'll start listening to what you have to say. (Roy, January 25, p. 4).

The above statement came from Roy, the self-described "senior member" (Jan. 25, p. 1) of the group, during our first conversation. In this early contribution, Roy captured the essence of the connective experience for many of the teachers in this study. At first glimpse, there seems to be a power struggle implicit in Roy's language. Indeed, students can wield power through their classroom discourse (Golish & Olsen, 2009). However, given the ultimate direction of his observation—that the wall comes down via humanization—and in the context of a conversation around pursuing and making connections, the assertion was less about authority and more about acknowledging or cultivating vulnerability. When Roy implied that connection is the ability to "show that you're a real person," he described the courage required to embrace the vulnerability of imperfection (Brown, 2015). Roy's conclusion that, having shown yourself to be human—vulnerably imperfect—leads to the recognition that "they'll start listening to what you have to say" (Brown, 2015). While the language here also implies power, it also reflects a classroom

dialectic, an exchange of ideas that form the student-teacher relationship (Candela, 1998). To “start listening” implies students are willing to connect with teachers intellectually, which Roy posited comes only after they have connected with teachers in a more fully human capacity. Indeed, for many teachers in this study, human connection was primarily a means to the end goal of learning, while for others it was an existential necessity for enduring the COVID-19 pandemic. This range of perspectives around connection—defined here as the nuanced pursuit of emotional knowledge, love, and care—succinctly stated in Roy’s synopsis of the phenomenon, encapsulates the range of experiences described by the teachers in this study.

In the following sections, I use Roy’s initial statement as a guide to explore the participants’ experiences with connection during the pandemic. Borrowing from his specific language, I begin with a section titled “The Wall,” wherein I describe themes found in the experiences of disconnection in this context. I use the participants’ experiences to reveal the existential and practical wall of disconnection these teachers encountered during this study. The aim is to capture for the reader in more practical terms the influence of the study’s setting on the participants’ experiences of disconnection in its various thematic forms. Following this, I move to a section titled “That Wall Will Come Down” where I present themes found in the teachers’ experiences in pursuit of connection. Borrowing from Roy’s specific language, I show in thematic groups how participants’ pursuits of connection were tools used to bring down the pervasive and multi-dimensional wall of disconnection in the late winter and early spring of 2021. Finally, the thematic findings conclude with a section called “Start Listening” which details the ways that participants’ experienced this inquiry group as a community of truth through which they connected professionally and personally during a period of professional and cultural isolation.

Before moving on to the findings, I want to provide a reminder of the methodological process. In keeping with the methodological expectations of interpretative phenomenological analysis, I often bracketed my personal responses to themes and experiences throughout the data analysis process. Per Smith et al. (2022), setting aside my preconceptions in this way allowed me to understand the participants' experiences more accurately (Smith et al, 2022). And while I recognize the Heideggerian notion of intersubjectivity or “the shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 13), I wanted to make a clear my efforts to emphasize the experiences of the participants. As such, in an effort to provide a faithful interpretation of the participants' experiences, I purposely limited discussion of my own experiences around similar themes in the data. Later, in chapter five, I describe my *dasein*—or sense of being there—and acknowledge my fore-sights before ultimately completing the hermeneutic circle. Therefore, in the section that follows, I have made an earnest attempt to get out of the way of the data and allow the participants experiences to support my thematic findings.

The Wall: Coping with Contextual Struggles

On March 8, 2021, nearly a year to the day when teachers and students were initially sent home due to the emergence of the novel coronavirus, Jennifer described her struggles with connection in plain language: “There's so much missing from a normal school year that you can't replicate in your class. Let's be honest, you really can't” (Jennifer, March 8, p. 6). Here, Jennifer encapsulated the frustrating recognition that disconnection abounded for the teachers attempting their work during a global pandemic. The struggle inherent in Jennifer's lamentation “there's so much missing” was paired with a plea to release that struggle in a common recognition of the limitations: “let's be honest.” This plea for honesty sought reconciliation, for both Jennifer and

her colleagues, by acknowledging the limitations of their capacities as educators in a pandemic. This plea belied, in a multiplicity of instances to follow, participants' struggles to reconcile what was lost in the pandemic context with what was historically known by them as teachers. In this way, the wall of disconnection was partially a struggle to reconcile some teachers' historical expectations around their work with the contextual reality of teaching from living room to bedroom, so to speak. Indeed, for these teachers, there was so much missing. In the same way that artists use negative space to define features, I want to establish the essence of the metaphorical wall by first introducing the reader to experiences of disconnection. Doing so will bring the reader more fully into the lived experience of the participants (Smith & Nizza, 2022), and therefore render the experiences of connection in a way that reflects the sense of verisimilitude required by my methodological approach. Beyond methods, I also chose to begin with disconnection because disconnection abounded in these teachers' experiences. It was a defining feature of teaching and learning during the pandemic, with demonstrated impacts on mental health and well-being for students and teachers (Baker et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Kush et al., 2021; Poletti, 2020). The simple pursuit of connection was a small and persistent act of hope that took courage. In order to make that distinction clear, I therefore begin with disconnection. I want to clearly demonstrate the pervasive nature of the phenomenon so that teachers' attempts to bring that wall down reflect their hope and resilience.

Turn On Your Cameras, I Want To Look At You! As discussed earlier, the pandemic teaching context was an impossible puzzle for educators to try and solve. The shifting modalities of teaching virtually-at-home, virtually-on-campus, and in hybrid situations over the course of the pandemic led to a range of experiences that fortified the wall of disconnection. Once again, I remind the reader that all participants were in a virtual-at-home learning model from January

through March, which meant that teachers and students were physically isolated during the first half of the study. When students returned for hybrid learning in the spring, many chose to remain virtual through the end of the school year (and, therefore, the end of the study). In response to this physical isolation, many teachers described deeply emotional responses to the on-going virtual learning model.

To understand those teachers' experiences in this section, it is important to recall the virtual classroom setting at Gateway during this study. Throughout all phases of the various learning models in this setting (virtual-at-home, virtual-on-campus, hybrid), the virtual classroom never went away. This meant that the classroom space, at all times during the school year, consisted of a group of students in a videoconferencing call via Google Meet. During all-virtual learning, all students and teachers in the class became participants in the video call. Participants in a Google Meet call were encouraged—but not mandated—by teachers and administrators to participate in classes by turning on their video cameras and muting their computer microphones during synchronous class time so they could be visually present but audibly silent—not unlike a physical classroom scenario.

However, in the virtual classroom/Google Meet call, students were able to control their microphones and their cameras, and a majority of students chose to leave their cameras off. At least one teacher, Jennifer, described attempting to link camera usage to participation grades, but she eventually chose to move away from the practice when it became clear that students were simply unwilling to be on camera. Leaving one's camera off diminished the student's identity to a simple, circular default icon whose setting was a randomly chosen color with the user's initials centered in white. Google Meet participants—both students and teachers—were able to upload a picture to replace the standard icon so that, should they require their cameras to be off, their

image was still present. When class was in session, rather than looking at a room full of human faces showing varying degrees of interest, teachers in a virtual classroom looked at a mostly black screen, with icons organized along a grid, among which would be the occasional live face. While the students had many justifiable reasons for keeping their cameras off, the teachers' experiences of that decision created a common theme in this study (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

The proliferation of students not turning on their cameras, however, did not negate the emotional response such a decision elicited from the teachers in this study. Caroline, one of the math teachers in the group, offered a resonant frustration with the limitations of the model:

I feel that disconnect, and it does take an effect on—I'm exhausted already. I feel like I'm just staring at screens and staring at their little thumbnails. I'm just frustrated. I'm tired of looking at those stupid Pokémon things! I'm over it. Turn on your cameras, I want to look at you! I'm feeling defeated in that sense. So, I don't know. I'm over this year. That's it. I'm done. I'm done with virtual learning. (Caroline, February 22, pp. 5–6)

The sense of desperation was palpable. With her students reduced to “those stupid Pokémon things”—thumbnail icons that represented characters from pop culture and whose significations may not have been readily accessible for teachers nor easily associated with a students' persona—Caroline expressed a sense of defeat brought on by the inherent unknowability of her students in the virtual classroom. The desire to connect, to see her students was clear, and her words reflect an experience of despair that reflected the level of exhaustion (“I'm exhausted”), frustration (“I'm over it”) and, ultimately, sense of defeat (“I'm done”) that was described by other participants in various ways.

Roy also experienced frustration with the lack of student visibility. Where Caroline lamented the “stupid Pokémon things,” Roy felt frustration from the emotional disconnect

embedded in the virtual classroom's inherent lack of engagement, particularly when compared with the casual, open sharing he was used to in a face-to-face setting:

When you're face to face with a student, they're a little easier to read. But, with this technology in between, half the time I cannot get an emotional response from my kids because they don't want to emanate emotional responses because they're at home. (Roy, January 25, p. 2)

For Roy, the ability to "read" a student meant an ability to recognize their emotional experience in that moment. In Roy's experience, students emoted differently at home and at school, and the inability to connect at an emotional level due to students' invisibility and reluctance to emote in this context added to the proverbial wall.

As a music teacher, Roy explained that the disconnect further impacted students' experience of the subject matter: "my subject requires so much about kids being together and working in groups. And we haven't been able to do that" (Roy, January 25, p. 2). With students learning virtually-at-home, there was no common classroom space to connect, so emotional experiences and perspectives could not be clearly articulated and understood by the class. Here, Roy recognized the ways that content area subjects experienced specific disruptions, a phenomenon that was experienced by several other teachers and will be explored more fully in a subsequent section. Roy and Caroline both experienced frustration with the inability to see their students, which prevented them from making emotional connections in ways in which those teachers were accustomed.

Adding complexity to the common experience of not being able to clearly see and hear students, Kelly found the students' lack of visibility during classes surprising:

Online they're more timid (sic) in terms of sharing, which I would think the opposite would be true, right? Like, you have a discussion in person and kids are afraid to share because they don't want to look silly. But here you're anonymous in a way if you don't even have your camera on" (Kelly, May 3, p. 8).

Similar to Roy and Caroline's emotional experience of their students' ostensible absence in the virtual realm, Kelly believed that the kind of anonymity that accompanied the virtual learning space (e.g., using a cartoon thumbnail in place of an actual picture of one's face) would allow more students to participate. However, as Sophia discovered through her own curiosity, the virtual classroom was a far more complex space than could be presumed.

Sophia, like her peers, experienced the frustration of students not turning on their cameras. She sought to understand the prevailing reluctance of students to engage in the virtual classroom, eventually asking her students why they continued to keep their cameras off despite pleas of their teachers and administrators. She summarized her students' feelings to the group:

. . . it's really just effort that goes into consciously remembering: "I have to unmute, say this, re-mute again, and keep going." So, they said, it just takes more effort. And it's more of a spotlight, too, because you're the only one that's unmuted at that point, or it's not like in class where you could say something and somebody else can just talk back and respond. Here, they have to actively unmute and think about what they're going to say. And then they also told me that it's just more intimidating for them. (Sophia, May 3, p. 12)

As Sophia described it, the students' experience of the virtual classroom was one of frustration, despair, and defeat. According to Sophia's experience, her students saw having to manually engage and disengage their microphones in order to participate as frustrating and

restricting the spontaneity of a live classroom; they described the “spotlight” of speaking in class as intimidating; and so, for Sophia, many of her students opted not to participate at all.

Interestingly, where Kelly assumed the anonymity of online discussions would be freeing for students, Sophia’s pupils perceived it as a kind of “spotlight,” from which they shied away.

Caroline and Roy’s frustrations, as well as Kelly’s presumptions about anonymity, paradoxically aligned with the students’ experiences in interesting ways, as both were navigating the virtual classroom’s lack of real-world spontaneity and organic conversations.

The effects of students’ decisions to remain off-camera, however valid and necessary to support their own well-being (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021), caused a kind of erasure for some of the teachers. Both Kelly and Bruce described the absence in powerful terms. Kelly reflected on the collective experience with students not participating virtually and walking around school in masks during hybrid learning: “I feel like they're ghosts” (Kelly, May 3, p. 7). Bruce confessed his experience with students’ invisibility led him to feel that “they're not real, because I'm talking to myself most of the time” (Bruce, May 3, pp. 9–10) Here, Bruce is referring to the experience of teaching to a virtual classroom that primarily consisted of a series of icons tiled on a black screen. Bruce went on to describe the impact on his practice: “because of that disconnect, I found it was easier for me to just almost go on autopilot” (Bruce, May 3, p. 10). He was describing yet another version of feeling defeated, similar to Caroline’s assertion “I’m done.” This experience appeared to have manifest in various forms for several of the teachers in this study and, by February, many teachers (and their students) were “done” in their own ways. As such, the teachers’ experiences of frustration, despair, and sense of defeat reflected the mental health and well-being challenges experienced by teachers around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker et al., 2021; Palma-Vasquez et al., 2021).

As can be seen by these teachers' experiences, a foundational part of the wall of disconnection was built into the virtual learning model's reliance on cameras and microphones to approximate physical presence in the classroom. The pandemic's virulence led to safety measures which relied on physical distance. To approximate the lost physical classroom, the virtual learning model created a digital classroom that lacked the spontaneity and ease of communication that comes from brick-and-mortar classrooms. While the teachers in this study modified their plans for pursuit of connection in the virtual setting, they could not modify their students' behavior or realities to fit the ideal expectations of the virtual classroom.

As Roy said, there was a wall between students and teachers. We know that students have dialectical power in the classroom (Candela, 1998; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). During the pandemic, the traditionally hierarchical power structure of the physical classroom was somewhat leveled in the virtual classroom. Unlike typical in-person classroom power dynamics where the presence of the teacher may influence behavior, as per the teachers' experiences in this study, educators in the virtual realm were just as much "ghosts" as their students. In some ways, both Bruce and Sophia's students rejected the tedium of the virtual classroom: Bruce found himself "on autopilot" while Sophia's class preferred to stay silent rather than do the work of engaging. In this way, some teachers' experiences were slightly mirrored (albeit in potentially different ways) by their students, creating a kind of mutual disconnection in response to the difficulties of navigating the nuances of the virtual classroom. For several of the teachers in this study, the virtual setting's ultimate disconnection was not only physical, it was an emotionally exhausting and frustrating obstacle to teaching and learning. Conversely, the students' capacity to decide whether to turn on their cameras or not potentially gave them slightly more power than they were used to, and it may be that teachers had to cope with potentially new limits to their influence as

well. This same kind of reckoning with the limitations of the virtual and hybrid classroom also led to some teachers questioning their ability to satisfactorily assess their performance and to respond to the needs of their students.

I Feel—I Know That There’s More That I Could Do. Some teachers’ experiences of disconnection were exacerbated by the disorienting nature of teaching in this context, and they struggled to reliably and fairly assess their own performance and the efforts of their students. Among some of the math teachers, this led to the reported feeling that students were cheating. As the participants described below, these teachers believed that students were looking up solutions to assigned problems through Google’s search engine and, specifically, a web-based application called Photomath. Experiences with presumed or actual cheating led to a reckoning of these teachers’ practical limitations in the virtual and hybrid teaching context. This, in turn, led to introspection that revealed some teachers internalizing the issues attending to the virtual context as problems they individually had to solve. More specifically, Jennifer, Caroline, Cynthia, and Kelly described emotional experiences ranging from guilt to blind hope as they attempted to adapt to the uncertainty of their students’ and, by proxy, their own potentialities as learners and teachers during a pandemic.

The unknowability of students’ experiences in the virtual and hybrid learning model during the pandemic led some teachers to suspect that their students were not being academically honest. Jennifer confessed: “I know I shouldn’t assume this, but my assumption is that most kids are cheating” (Jennifer, March 22, p. 9). Cynthia, too, presumed students were taking shortcuts, “I’ve got a bunch of kids just Googling all the answers” (Cynthia, February 8, p. 3). Caroline believed students were going beyond Google and using online applications to get their work done: “They’re using Photomath and getting the answers and then submitting work hoping that

we don't look at it" (Caroline, March 22; p. 9). Photomath is, at the time of this writing, a digital application that claims to support students' understanding of mathematical concepts and processes by walking students through problems and explaining the steps along the way (photomath.com). Purported to be a teaching tool by the developers, Photomath allows students to manually input, or upload a picture of, a sample math problem to the application which will then demonstrate the solution. Potentially a helpful learning tool, the application was not a sanctioned tool for these assignments, and therefore made it out-of-bounds for student use. To support her claims that students were using these applications, Caroline explained: "I know that they're finding the solutions or steps online, [because] the steps don't even look remotely close to what I've taught them" (Caroline, March 22, p. 9). Caroline saw that students were not learning from her, but learning from the internet, which was a problem for her, as she believed her job was to teach these students. The implication here, for Caroline, was deeply personal and existential: if the internet could do her job for her, then what was her purpose?

Student cheating was a concern for many educators during the switch to emergency remote teaching at the onset of the pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2020). Academic misconduct was found to have increased during the pandemic's virtual learning environment (Newton & Essex, 2023). At least one popular online resource, Chegg, was reportedly used to cheat on a higher number of digital exams during COVID-19 than prior to the pandemic (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). In many ways, these teachers' fears were not unfounded. Student cheating has been seen by some critical educators as reflective of neoliberal values that motivated students to focus on self-enhancement (Pulfrey & Butera, 2013). Giroux (2002) posited that the dangers of neoliberalism and the proliferation of corporate culture on college campuses has led to a destructively self-interested student body, with student cheating being one example of the forms

of self-interest. Cheating has also been identified as a by-product of the high-stakes testing environment that has proliferated in American schools since the early 2000s (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In Atlanta, GA, in 2015, a jury convicted 11 educators from Atlanta Public Schools over a cheating scandal that focused on falsified test scores in order to reap financial rewards for individuals and the district (Blinder, 2015). Cheating, therefore, has been a phenomenon that predated the pandemic and could be indicative of larger ideals embedded in a capitalistic culture. Despite this, some of the teachers in this study who encountered student cheating or academic dishonesty blamed themselves in response, while others sought classroom solutions to a problem that is created by the larger structures of capitalism.

Caroline described a sense of futility around the situation: “It's discouraging, but then what do I do? What can I say? And how can I call them out on that? Or you know, get an honest answer?” (Caroline, March 22, p. 9). The implication was contextual: during the pandemic, finding proof of cheating was more difficult, and the burden of proof was on the teacher, who could not spot a cheater as easily online as they might have in class (e.g., using notes, or checking their phone during a quiz). Additionally, with students already asked to spend their days connected to the internet to access their web-based classroom resources (i.e., Google Classroom and Google Meets), there was a kind of logical sense that students would also use Google’s search engine—or any other digital resource, for that matter—to answer their questions outside the virtual classroom. Cynthia recognized that aspect of the situation, asking rhetorically, “I don't know—how do you want them to learn?” (Cynthia, February 8, p. 3). On a very basic level, despite sharing common digital spaces in their virtual classroom, students and teachers were ostensibly alone for at least half of this study. Cynthia’s rhetorical question—“how do you want them to learn?”—got at a larger truth within the virtual setting: when students were

separated from teachers to whom they might have turned for extra help or support, it should be no surprise that students were using whatever resources they could to compete in the academic environment. Cheating may also have been a way for students to demonstrate their resistance to the kind of teaching taking place in the virtual classroom (Doerr, 2021).

Jennifer, Caroline, and Cynthia described their experiences with students cheating or operating in academically dishonest ways. Their collective responses revealed a common tendency for these teachers to try and provide solutions to the problems on their own, at the individual level. Further, they each internalized the experience of students cheating in the virtual learning environment. Jennifer believed that there was more she could do. Caroline revealed a sense of resignation to the futility of the disconnected environment. Both Jennifer and Caroline implied that any solution would have to come from them: “I know there is more that *I* can do” (Jennifer, February 8, p. 2; emphasis mine); “what can *I* do? What can *I* say?” (Caroline, March 22, p. 9, emphasis mine). Both saw themselves as the source of the solution, thereby putting the responsibility for solving this common cultural issue in their own classrooms and teaching. Both implied that it was them—not school administrators, not parents, not the larger context—who could help stop students cheating during the pandemic. This kind of inward turn reflected the larger culture of schooling that pre-dated the pandemic, specifically the culture of hyper-individualism and zero-sum game surrounding schools in the neoliberal context (Elvira, 2020). That turn inwards was also found when teachers encountered other boundaries to the virtual learning context, and is worth exploring further to understand the levels of disconnection at play in these teachers’ experiences.

Jennifer described a sense of guilt when she recognized the limitations of her historical teaching practice in the virtual classroom: “I feel—I know that there's more that I could do. But,

it's hard when you can't walk around the room and watch them graph a line” (Jennifer, February 8, p. 2). She discussed the pedagogical limitations of the context, recognizing how her physical absence eliminated her capacity to use a historically successful approach to teaching in-the-moment via individual feedback (e.g., “watch them graph a line”). As with student cheating, the recognition that she could not be as full and present as an educator due to the physical disconnection of the virtual teaching environment led Jennifer to turn inwards and assume responsibility for a situation that was largely beyond her control. Again, her concern with doing more—to cover her content, to connect with her students, to understand how she should proceed in this context—reflected cultural expectations that educators are individuals responsible for other individuals and not necessarily part of larger cultural machinations. This kind of pragmatic, individually-oriented response to culturally conscripted expectations was experienced by other teachers as well.

Where Jennifer saw the context eliminate a practical capacity to connect in real-time with her students, Kelly similarly felt that the context undermined the feedback loop that happens with her students in real-time. She explained: “What's been challenging is not being able to gauge online how the students are responding. Like, are they enjoying the class? Are they not enjoying the class?” (Kelly, May 3, p. 7), adding “it's hard to see what they're getting out of it, or if they're getting anything out of it or not” (Kelly, May 3, p. 7). While Jennifer felt a sense of needing to do more to overcome the practical obstacle to supporting her students, Kelly expressed a mournful resignation of the finality in the disconnection, saying of her all-virtual students, “There is a certain kind of sadness that I am feeling because I won't—I've never had the physical interaction in the classroom with them” (Kelly, May 3, p. 8). Kelly's response followed the theme as she experienced the disconnection personally, as the inability to engage with her

students and assess their experience and understandings results in “sadness.” However, where they differed is in the sense of having to overcome that boundary. Whereas Jennifer felt that there was more she could do to reach her students, Kelly accepted the circumstances with a heavy heart. It was implied that Kelly did not want to live with this emotion, and the commonality was the internalization of a larger, complex phenomenon of disconnection as a result of teaching during a pandemic.

Another example demonstrated the complexity of these teachers’ experiences. Cynthia described responding to the student cheating and pressurized expectations in a more lighthearted, impersonal way. Where Jennifer felt guilty about not being able to use the practical skills she had accumulated in her teaching repertoire, and Kelly dipped into sadness at the lack of physical communication, Cynthia responded in a more optimistic way: “I’m just living on the hope that my kids are just getting it” (Cynthia, February 8, p. 3). Contrary to Jennifer’s struggle to reconcile her teaching limitations with the physical disconnection, Cynthia implied that she had, at some level, surrendered to the context. For her, adopting “hope” that students were learning was a recognition of the uncertainty around her own work in the virtual context. Cynthia also recognized that the academic expectations for students learning virtually during the pandemic were unrealistic:

I don't know how the expectation is so high. When they come back to school, all of a sudden, they should be scientists and chemists! At most, they probably will come back knowing how to cook and knowing how to bake. But not knowing math. (Cynthia, February 8, p. 3)

In existential fashion, Cynthia implied that the high expectations for students in a disconnected, virtual learning environment during a global pandemic were inherently absurd.

Her understanding that students would gain practical skills such as cooking and baking rather than, for example, an ability to balance equations was a recognition that the pressures of schooling at a time of catastrophe were essentially and existentially meaningless. Cynthia was describing an implicit acknowledgement that what mattered during the pandemic was neither math nor English, but the capacity to be present in the world with what surrounded you. At a conceptual level, her implication was that students would be learning more during a pandemic about tactical life experiences than they should be worried about excelling in tested subjects. In fairness, Cynthia had presumed that all students had access to kitchens and baking supplies, and she may have failed to recognize the consequences of non-academic instruction for at-risk students during the pandemic. Still, it was interesting to see that, while several of her peers experienced a concentrated and internalized version of the stressors of the neoliberal influence of American public schools, Cynthia deflected that weight and reoriented her focus on the absurdity of the situation.

The disorientation of teaching in the hybrid and virtual contexts led these teachers to doubt their individual capacities and to enter into more existential questions about themselves as educators. The examples above marked a turning point in the findings, where teachers' concerns around individual classroom experiences expanded to include questions of covering wide-scale curriculum content. Just as Cynthia evoked the existential through recognizing absurdity, in the next sub-section, other teachers struggled to reconcile the pervasive feeling of needing to cover the state's standards-based content with an earnest desire to connect with their students that, at times, conflicted with messages from the school's administrators, state-level decision-makers, and teachers' historical notions of what mattered in their classrooms.

We're Not Gonna Get Through All This Material. Standards-based education reform has a long and controversial history (Berger, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2008). For the teachers in this study, New Jersey's learning standards became both a beacon to follow during an otherwise uncertain time and yet another professional and emotional burden to bear. Looming over every teacher in this study was the pressure to cover curriculum content, alongside the desire to create connections with their students. In this section, I demonstrate how, for some teachers, covering content and making connections were opposing goals that created internal conflict; for others, the content and connection were one in the same; and, for others still, connection mattered far more than content. This kind of connection/content continuum revealed a complex image of how teachers conceived of connection and the role of content in their approach to connection. Somewhat paradoxically, I include this theme as part of the wall of disconnection and, in the pages to follow, describe how some teachers struggled with the role of content amid their efforts to connect with students in the hybrid and virtual classrooms of the pandemic. Later in the chapter, I attempt to demonstrate the complexity of the phenomenon by describing the ways some teachers used content as a site of connection in novel ways.

The concern with covering content was an immediate and common experience for the teachers in this study. The teachers experienced this concern in a range of ways that might be best described as a continuum. On the one end of the continuum was Bruce, an English teacher, who said, "the priority for me has become less about the content and more about that feeling . . . of them having learned something" (Bruce, February 8, p. 3), and who also declared later in the study, "It's not even about the content anymore" (Bruce, April 19, p. 8). By the end of the study, Bruce was willing to put aside the demands of the existing English curriculum in order to focus on what he felt was the best thing to do while teaching during the pandemic. At this end of the

continuum, connection was privileged over covering content. The other end of the spectrum was represented by Caroline, a math teacher, who felt that her content area limited her capacity for human connection and believed sticking to the mathematics content standards would show her sense of care and serve as a source of connection in itself. In her words, “especially in the math classroom, I find it so hard to give them a space sometimes to have that open dialogue” (Caroline, January 25, p. 2). For Caroline, “open dialogue” meant discussing more personal, humanizing elements of each other’s lives that were not mathematical in nature. Importantly, Caroline’s conception of connection focused on her ability to successfully teach her students, as she said: “my way of showing that I’m there for them is that we’re doing what we need to do” (Caroline, February 22, p. 5). Where Bruce was willing to put aside the content somewhat to focus on building human connections (or, to borrow Caroline’s phrase, “have that open dialogue”), Caroline described focusing on the content as the premium form of connection. Most teachers in this study appear to have fallen somewhere between these two teachers’ ideals.

For example, Cynthia, another math teacher, found a balance between content and connection by taking a larger view of the role of teaching and considering students’ immediate experience: “A tiny portion of their life is going to be content. There’s still that grand thing about school that they love the most, which is human interaction” (Cynthia, March 8, p. 7). This allowed Cynthia to take a more connection-oriented approach, saying “you try as much as possible to do it content-wise and try to get your work out of the way” (Cynthia, March 8, p. 7). In this instance, Cynthia was positioning the work of teaching the content as something that was in the way of connection. For Cynthia, getting the content done and “out of the way” allowed space for human connections.

Similarly, Kelly felt “so behind, because we have these 25-minute periods and because I feel like in order to connect with students, I have to devote time to just mental health” (Kelly, January 25, p. 2). In this case, Kelly had privileged connection via tending to students’ mental health, which led to her feeling “so behind.” Nonetheless, feeling behind was something she was willing to tolerate, as she advocated to her peers the importance “to take that time [away from content] and give them a space to have fun and just talk about what they want to talk about is just as valuable” (Kelly, January 25, p. 2).

Balancing the dual needs of the classroom required flexibility of mind. Kelly illustrated (in the quote above) the capacity to “feel behind” content-wise while also moving ahead with efforts to forge connection. Making connections in that way put her, technically, further behind, but it was a risk she was willing to take. This malleability was illustrated by Bruce (as seen above) and other participants as well, including Jennifer, who reported a change of heart around the content/connection conundrum through the middle of the school year: “In the beginning [of the school year], there was a lot of pressure for me to make the most of that time for content, but I very quickly realized that it just wasn't the way to go” (Jennifer, January 25, p. 2).

Some teachers saw the tension in making time to connect as a sacrifice of time for content: “we literally just spent the entire 25 minutes just talking to each other. And I feel like I connected more with them in those 25 minutes that it was worth the sacrifice of losing some content today” (Sophia, March 8, p. 8). Jennifer, too, referenced the nature of sacrifice on three instances in one conversation: “the willingness to sacrifice that time, even if it’s five, sometimes 10 whole minutes;” “sacrificing, I think, is a big thing that I’ve had to do,” “sacrificing content just for establishing connections with the freshmen” (Jennifer, January 25, p. 2). Additionally, Caroline, whose perspective helped establish one of the poles in the content-versus-connection

continuum, demonstrated a level of flexibility that could also be considered a kind of sacrifice. In February, she described the tension she felt around using class time for connections versus content: “I feel we’re in such a time crunch and I want to get through content and I feel I’d be doing them a disadvantage” (Caroline, February 8, p. 3). The following month, she explained how she attempted a more balanced approach: “It’s not just work, work, work, all the time. But even that, it’s hard to snip out some content to give them room to build that connection. So, it’s hard. It’s a little give and take” (Caroline, March 8, p. 8). While Caroline clearly maintained her vision for the importance of covering content materials, she recognized that contextual need to make space for connections in the virtual classroom and was willing to sacrifice some time to connect.

Taking a larger track to the question of content, Roy posited that teachers’ concerns with covering content was largely baseless in this context. He explained to the group:

the expectation [from administration] is that we’re not going to get through 100% of our curricular content by the end of the school year. So, there is no arbiter right now, there is no guideline, there’s nothing that has said you must get through 60% of it, or 40% of it, or 75% of it. (Roy, January 25, p. 4)

Neither the administrative team at Gateway High School nor the state government declared clear expectations for how teachers should progress through their content during this school year. In the specific instance of Gateway High School, contact time with students was limited by nearly 50% during the 2020–2021 school year, with student contact time reduced from 41 to 25 minutes (Restart Plan). Furthermore, the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA), the state’s annual standardized testing series, was repeatedly pushed back throughout the school year and not formally cancelled until April 6, 2021 (Gleason, 2021). The delay meant that teachers

continued to work under the expectation that students would be assessed by the state and, therefore, they needed to cover certain curricular benchmarks. The teachers' reactions revealed the level of existential reckoning that was brought upon by the uncertainty of teaching to a standardized test during a pandemic. Without changing guidance around the status of state testing, some teachers defaulted to their own approaches to meeting standards. For many who felt "behind," or some other sense of sacrifice, we see a default mode of compliance and fear, both of which reflected the neoliberal reality of standards-based education (Slater & Griggs, 2015).

Several teachers attempted, to varying degrees, reconciling the looming expectation to meet local and state standards with their own teaching values in the pandemic context. While it appeared to have been existentially easier for some than for others, the experience of having to make that negotiation between, again, historical knowledge of what and how to teach and adapting to the unique needs of the context thereby situated these experiences as part of the wall of disconnection. These experiences yielded an example of the macro-level concerns teachers reported, where the policies and expectations—or lack thereof—of the state and local district influenced their lived experiences as teachers during the pandemic. Another example of this phenomenon that was also an aspect of the larger wall of disconnection was the culture of accountability that developed around the pandemic teaching context, which I examine in the next subsection.

Now You're Looking Over Your Shoulder. While all teachers in this study were invited to participate based on their interest in cultivating connections with students during the pandemic, they inadvertently shared another form of connection which they had little interest and less control over: hyperconnected parents and administrators. The term hyperconnected is chosen

purposefully, and is intended in the manner described by Niall Ferguson (2017) who examined the complexities of our vastly networked world and described how the initial ideals of technology to bring people together has, in many ways, done the opposite throughout history and the present. He described how networks are inherently human—in his view, there is a false dichotomy between hierarchy and networks, positing hierarchies as a kind of network—and how the technological innovations of the 21st century in pursuit of greater connection (i.e., Facebook and Google) have both supported individual and collective liberation (e.g., the Arab Spring) and helped further divide American politics into “two echo chambers, each deaf to the other’s arguments” (p. 1). In this study, the term hyperconnected is used to acknowledge the ways that connectivity went awry for teachers attempting their work during the pandemic. Specifically, I use the term to describe the phenomenon of parents who used the virtual classroom setting to go beyond typical boundaries of parent-school relationships and administrators whose responses to such parents were experienced as punitive and effacing teachers’ sense of professionalism. Furthermore, the term hyperconnected reflected the highly polarized American political climate during the 2020–2021 school year. As I mentioned earlier, this school year followed the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and began with highly politicized divisions around the role of government in mandating safety measures to protect against COVID-19, such as public masking and immunization requirements (Young et al., 2022) This study also took place immediately following outgoing-President Donald Trump’s supporters staged an insurrection at the U. S. Capitol building in an attempt to overthrow the election results. Therefore, the experiences in this section reflect Ferguson’s (2017) recognition of the ways that the early ideals of a hyperconnected world could be detrimental to cultures and the individuals therein. In the case of our teachers, it began with the understanding that a virtual classroom meant a portal had opened

that took their classrooms into the living rooms, kitchens, dining rooms, and bedrooms of their students. In other words, virtual learning brought parents into the classroom, which had real implications for these teachers' experiences.

Some teachers described how their administrators' decision to hold classes in a virtual learning environment led to fear of parents intervening or undermining their lessons. They talked about feeling wary of doing or saying anything that might be misinterpreted by a student's onlooking parent, guardian or family member. As such, these teachers adapted their plans and skipped or only lightly visited important, politically-charged topics, even when doing so felt wrong to them. In different ways, several of the teachers feared for their professional livelihood. Roy captured the mood here:

now you got to watch what you're teaching and how you're teaching it because you're second guessing yourself. "Oh my god, are they gonna comment on this? What are they gonna say? Oh, my God, is she gonna text her mom if I present this? And so, you can't teach to your best level, because now you're looking over your shoulder. (Roy, February 22, p. 7)

Concern with teachers' sharing their political beliefs in the classroom is not new, and thinkers such as Paolo Freire (1970/2000) and Henry Giroux (1988) have advocated for teachers to embrace their political positions, not to indoctrinate but to claim their intellectual and moralistic positions in the world and display them with integrity and clarity. It appears that some teachers in the pandemic battled the expectation of "neutrality," a position which ultimately hurt vulnerable students who could benefit from allies and limited teachers' capacities to prepare students to participate in a democratic society (Walker, 2018). School districts around the U. S. have made clear that they value neutrality, as a 2022 *Washington Post* analysis found at least 74

teachers had been fired and 92 who had resigned for political reasons since 2020—numbers the authors acknowledged were likely lower than the reality as “scores of firing and resignations go unreported in local media” (Natanson & Balingit, 2022, para. 11). Against this political backdrop, Roy’s feeling that he needed to look over his shoulder was not mere paranoia. Nor was Roy the only teacher who felt this way while teaching virtually during the pandemic.

Yessica, who taught American Literature, explained how she adapted a position of neutrality when she changed her approach to Black History Month materials to avoid potential conflicts: “I didn't want to step on any toes. I didn't know what was the right thing to say, or what I couldn't say. I didn't want to offend anyone, so I just kept it super light” (Yessica, February 22, p. 4). Ryan, a history teacher, also felt the pressure to remain neutral when describing his efforts around Black History Month during virtual teaching, adding: “you’re walking on egg shells, what it feels like” (February 22, p. 3).

Caroline sought to avoid politics completely in her math classes:

I'm not gonna even go there. I do not want to talk about politics at all with the kids, that's the last thing I need is for some parent to jump in and say that I'm trying to enforce my political beliefs. I want no part of it. (Caroline, January 25, p. 2)

Her apolitical stance, however, was not a position she took lightly. For Caroline, there was a personal tension in a neutral political position because it went against her ideals. She explained to the group: “as educators, it's our responsibility to educate our kids about what's going on. And I felt that I should or I needed to do that” (Caroline, January 25, p. 2). Caroline was referring to the desire to discuss the events of the January 6th insurrection on the Capitol. She described wanting to talk about the situation, but ultimately the fear of repercussion complicated her decision: “I was scared because I felt there's no place for that in a math classroom” (Caroline,

January 25, p. 2). Caroline's decision to prioritize the curriculum over her desire to engage in a civics discussion was an ironic attempt at remaining apolitical. In choosing to avoid politics, Caroline made the political decision to ignore the democratic and civic responsibilities of the educator, which transcended state standards. As Giroux (1988) argued about the importance of helping students develop political consciousness:

it must become clear to them that schooling is a political process, not only because it contains a political message or deals with political topics on occasion, but also because it is produced and situated in a complex of social and political relations from which it cannot be abstracted. (pp. 52–53)

When teachers refused to discuss politics, or change their plans to avoid accusations of political bias, they are still acting politically. In the case of these teachers, their fears in the pandemic context may have silenced them. This point is not made to blame teachers for their decisions to survive in the trauma of the pandemic. Their fears were real, as their experiences with parents intervening in their classrooms are shown in the next few paragraphs.

The openness of the virtual classroom setting allowed, for the first time, the possibility of intrusive parental engagement in the classroom. This appeared to be a drastic change for the teachers in this study who, despite their levels of experience, had become accustomed to teaching in their own classrooms with few, if any, additional adult interactions. The concept was so foreign and unexpected as to be seen as potentially absurd. Cynthia laughed it off: "Can you imagine you're running a class and a parent is sitting next to you?" (Cynthia, January 25, p. 2). By sarcastically asking "Can you imagine," Cynthia recognized the impossibility of teaching with students' parents in the room. A parent in the classroom, particularly at the high school level, was unimaginable for these teachers. Therefore, when students joined a Google Meet for

virtual-at-home learning, the classroom crossed beyond traditional boundaries to include the students' homes. It may be no surprise, then, to learn that parents did enter the virtual classroom on occasion. The teachers' experiences with parents entering or listening in on their classroom activity was not always negative. However, for Sophia, one parent crossed the virtual boundary repeatedly and served as an ominous symbol for the other participants of what hyperconnection could look like when taken too far.

Before describing her experience, I want to clarify that the aim of this depiction is not to malign the particular individual or to villainize parents who were also enduring the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, Sophia's experience was illustrative of the collective fears and anxieties that some teachers experienced around this particular element of disconnection during the pandemic. Additionally, as I explicate later on in the chapter, in Sophia sharing her experience, she provided a rallying point around which several teachers were able to connect as a community of professionals and peers.

While many of the teachers in this study were concerned about the potential political blowback from parental exposure to the virtual classroom, Sophia's fears were realized. Characterized as a "mom who pretty much watches all of the [Google] Meets," Sophia shared with the group an ongoing issue with one parent who intruded into her classroom in several ways. Sophia explained how, after classes with this parent's child, she would receive emails from them undermining her professional decisions, asking her "why would you do this in class today? Why did you do this?" (Sophia, February 22, p. 5). Additionally, this parent used the connected nature of the school community to attack Sophia's professional reputation: "this parent went so far as to email the entire junior class's parents about how I'm not a good teacher" (Sophia, February 22, p. 6).

As a result, this experience of hyperconnection led to hypervigilance for Sophia, who said, “with that class, I have to be super careful. And when I make a mistake in that class, I’m like, ‘Oh, my God, I can’t believe I messed up on that problem’ and so I have to go back and fix it,” an experience she described as “nerve wracking” (Sophia, February 22, p. 5). Additionally, this specific instance of parental intrusion led to a disconnection with the student after administrators decided to leave the child in her class but instructed Sophia to limit personal interactions with the student and not engage with the parent: “No contact whatsoever. I still have her kid in my class, but I cannot have any contact whatsoever with this parent” (Sophia, February 22, p. 5). Sophia experienced this as detrimental to her capacity to teach the child: “I barely have any communication with them, which is really tough because I talk to that entire class, I do one-on-one feedback” (Sophia, February 22, p. 5). Formative feedback has been shown to improve learning if and when delivered correctly (Shute, 2008). Specifically, for students learning online, those who received personalized feedback performed better academically than their peers and reported feeling more satisfied in the class (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). While the administrative decision for Sophia to limit contact with the parent may have been a protective measure on their part, limiting personal interactions with the student may have had negative educational outcomes.

And yet, not all experiences with parents were negative or intrusive. Roy experienced a supportive boost from a parent during some of his class discussions: “Occasionally, I’ve engaged with the parents in some of my class discussions, because they happen to be an expert in a particular subject matter that we’re discussing at the moment, which is great” (Roy, January 25, p. 3). Even Sophia explained how the same tool of hyperconnection—in this case, mass group email—used in an attempt to undermine her professionalism was also used as a mechanism of

support. In response to the email sent by the parent above to the junior class parents, Sophia explained how: “I had some [other] parents emailing me showing a ton of support, though. I didn't get one negative email. They were like . . . ‘I don't know what is going on, my son or daughter really loves your class.’ So, that made me feel so much better” (Sophia, February 22, p. 6). As indicated by the definition of hyperconnection, the networked nature of our culture—particularly during the pandemic—was such that we could instantly communicate, for better and for worse. Sophia experienced both ends of the hyperconnected spectrum during the pandemic.

In addition to, or perhaps because of, the pervading fear of repercussions from parents in the virtual context, some teachers in this study became cognizant of the boundaries inherent to attempting connections with their students. This, in turn, factored into their approaches to connection. Ryan reflected on the ways that connection has historically been something to fear for him: “it's been put onto us the fear of getting too personal, or showing that softer side or having too much connection; a fear of what may happen during the repercussions” (Ryan, March 8, p. 4). Ryan went on to explain that one source of the fear—and the seat of repercussion—was the law: “they have that thing every year: ‘Don't go on social media, don't do this, don't do that.’ And, we're kind of restricted on what we can do. And if we do it, there may be repercussions” (Ryan, March 8, p. 4). Here, “that thing” was in reference to a mandatory faculty training focused on educational law which reminded the staff of the limits of their legal protections. The concern with “repercussions” implied Ryan's fear of how a good faith attempt at connection, in the hyperconnected context, could be misconstrued by a nearby parent. Although this fear did not explicitly prevent Ryan from attempting to make connections with his students, it informed his approach to the endeavor: “there's a fine line that we have to walk with being personal and connecting and then, also, being professional” (Ryan, March 8, p.4).

The “fine line” conception offered by Ryan was taken further by Cynthia, who recognized that connection was relative to each person:

I feel like the level of connection that you have with your kids is like your level of comfort; what you want to share with them. Do you want to be professional? Do you want to keep [connection to] the content? Do you want to keep [connection] to they know how many cats and dogs you have at home? Do you want to do how you feel today . . . Are you comfortable sharing your life experiences? When you were a child? (Cynthia, March 8, p. 7)

The implication here was that one chose their level of comfort on an individual basis. However, in the hyperconnected pandemic context, there was the lingering reality that any approach to connection may have been under a microscope. For instance, one could easily imagine how something as potentially innocuous as sharing a distant memory or an anecdote from their lives could result in blowback if taken out of context, simply for not being directly related to the content standards for that class. If Sophia could be consistently questioned for her pedagogical decisions related to the content, what might happen if she revealed something personal about a relationship, or discussed a topic beyond her curriculum, or ventured into a subtly political conversation with the class? The rhetorical point here was that, in the context of hyperconnectivity, the teachers in this study who adopted apolitical positions and practices may have also been adopting positions of safety.

In the face of rising anxiety and worsening mental health outcomes for teachers during the pandemic (Kush et al., 2022), staking a political identity a la Freire or Giroux was to invite criticism or worse. Further, teachers tend to hold lower status positions in American culture (Hargreaves, 2009) and have historically been socially constructed in negative ways as women

and caretakers (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). In the pandemic context, a 2022 survey found that while adults' views of public schools and teachers were high, respondents were less confident in teachers' capacity to handle difficult topics such as race, gender, and other politically charged issues in the classroom (PDK Poll, 2022). That same study indicated that a majority of adults did not want their children to become teachers, reflecting the historically lower status of teachers while pointing to a potentially bleak future. And yet, the teachers in this study described carefully calibrating their efforts to make connections during the pandemic, in spite of the pervading fear that came with a hyperconnected virtual classroom during the pandemic.

The ever-watchful eye of hyperconnection added another level to the wall of disconnection experienced by several of the teachers in this study. Some teachers deliberated their approaches to connection knowing that they were potentially being watched and knowing that, in the pandemic context, pursuing connection entailed taking a risk. Part of the risk was culturally-loaded, as the contentious political atmosphere of late 2020 and early 2021 spilled into the education realm. Part of the risk was also in a perceived lack of guidance and trust from Gateway's school leadership. In the following subsection, I describe how some teachers' experiences of isolation from their leaders contributed to another level of the wall of disconnection during the pandemic.

I Guess We Just Do Our Own Thing. Fears of hyperconnection were exacerbated by some of the teachers' feelings of isolation from their administration. Earlier in the chapter, Roy described a metaphorical wall between students and teachers. The data suggested there was also a wall between some teachers and administrators during the pandemic, both during and prior to the time of this study. Several teachers in this study questioned the support of their leadership and expressed frustration with what they perceived as contradicting or unclear expectations;

other teachers shared a feeling that the leaders of the school were more concerned with protecting parents and students than protecting their teachers. With the group providing evidence of how administration handled the worst-case-scenario hyperconnection experienced by Sophia, several were left emotionally unprotected and described feeling confused, resentful, and invisible. In this section, I describe those teachers experiences with their administrators as a final piece in the teachers' wall of disconnection.

Several teachers in this study experienced disconnection from administration which left them feeling confused. The confusion centered largely around directives and policies handed down throughout the year. A representative experience came during a winter storm in late January. Given that students were already in a virtual learning setting, on the morning of the storm, the administration announced they would hold a virtual snow day. In this instance, the virtual snow day differed from typical virtual instruction in that teachers were at liberty to host classes synchronously or asynchronously. The daily expectation in the virtual setting was synchronous instruction. Cynthia found the decision to be contrary to otherwise stated goals of her administrators: "It's a little confusing what you want us to do with the kids. You want us to connect with them, but then give them a virtual day?" (Cynthia, February 22, p. 4). Cynthia saw the administration's encouraging of teachers to prioritize social-emotional learning in their classes as contradictory to the snow-day decision to allow students to work alone virtually, removing them from the connective possibilities of the virtual classroom. Cynthia's point about disconnection also implied that administrators were trying to have things both ways or, as Ryan put it: "I think the school talks on both sides. They say that we're supposed to give the kids a break—social emotional learning—and on a snow day we should be teaching now? So, it's

confusing” (Ryan, February 8, p. 1). Importantly, both teachers’ comments revealed different interpretations of how to approach the vagaries of that virtual snow day.

The confusion led some teachers to recognize their own experiences as well as those of the students too. Cynthia recognized: “Our kids are trying to keep up with it but, with 100 different teachers doing 100 different things, no one is really is on the same page” (Cynthia, February 8, p. 3). Kelly, too, felt a sense of helplessness for herself and the students, saying, “It makes me confused. And it makes the students confused. And I don't know how to resolve that” (Kelly, February 8, p. 2). Ryan felt the lack of clarity to be a matter of fairness: “It's confusing. And not just for us. But, I think, also for the kids, too. And I think that's unfair for both of us” (Ryan, February 8, p. 1). In the end, Kelly’s helplessness encapsulated the mood, “I guess we just do our own thing” (Kelly, February 8, p. 2).

Kelly’s resolution that teachers “just do our own thing” might be seen as a possible moment of empowerment. After all, the freedom to choose whether to teach synchronously or asynchronously was a kind of autonomy; teachers were given leave to use their class time in the best way that they saw fit on that day. However, this was not how the decision resonated with our teachers. Instead, in an already isolated environment, these teachers appeared to interpret the flexibility as a source of confusion that was potentially damaging to them and their students. As Cynthia pointed out above, with “100 different teachers doing 100 different things” (Cynthia, February 8, p. 3), freedom may have fueled confusion and sowed deeper disconnections between students and their teachers, teachers and their administrators.

The snow day example illustrates the larger uncertainties and freedom under which these teachers attempted to do their work. Attempting virtual teaching for the first time offered a kind of existential freedom of choice, and that freedom could be emotionally burdensome. Even on a

practical level, teaching virtually required a reinvention of the craft for all teachers in this study. Teaching, one of the steadiest jobs for tenured teachers in America, became tumultuous and unpredictable. In that way, the decision to host a virtual snow day became a synecdoche for the larger experiences of the teachers whose lives were in the hands of administrators, perhaps literally. The confusion experienced around the snow day also reflected a micro-level experience to the macro-level fluctuating schedule of hybrid-virtual-hybrid teaching during that school year. Once again, this was not meant to judge the decisions of the administrators at Gateway High School. However, the tumultuous, uncertain nature of the school year left some teachers feeling disconnected from each other, from their community, and from their students. Several teachers described feeling resentment towards their administrative team which appears to have created a sense of professional disempowerment. This sentiment aligned with the findings from recent studies which found a relationship between a school principal's leadership style and teachers' sense of empowerment (Atik & Celik, 2020; Koiv et al., 2019). The confusion and lack of clarity from the principal at Gateway may have led teachers to become cynical in their attitudes towards their leaders during this study.

For instance, when teachers were suddenly encouraged to spotlight Black History Month and to share their efforts with the district, Ryan felt used: "like we're a billboard. We're here to prop everybody else up, make sure we look good" (February 22, p. 2). In this instance, Ryan suggested that Gateway's school leaders sudden focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, felt performative, a kind of "trickle-down racial empathy" (Ezell, 2021). Additionally, perhaps from a place of care, Ryan recognized that teachers being asked to redouble their efforts teaching Black History in the year following the 2020 Black Lives Matter reckoning required careful calibration: "You're opening up a lot of

wounds there, and you have to be ready for a conversation that you may not be ready for” (Ryan, February 22, pp. 2–3). In this specific example, Ryan recognized how the Gateway district’s version of “trickle-down racial empathy” might have led to pain for the students and, potentially, issues for the teachers whose lessons were not sufficiently prepared.

More generally, Roy felt that the top-down decision-making from his leaders during the pandemic left him with a sense of disempowerment which begat a desire to be part of the decision-making process: “You impose something on us without an explanation. We’re going to hit our head against the wall again. But let’s talk about it. Let’s figure this out [together]” (Roy, May 17, p. 18). In response to the number of questions, concerns, or complaints from parents as they moved through the pandemic learning environment, administrators told teachers to not engage with any parents on such matters and instructed them to forward all inquiries about pandemic-related policies and issues related to the virtual classroom environment to the administrative team. Caroline was not alone in perceiving that policy as a professional slight: “I feel like that reflects poorly on me. I’m not able to handle my own classroom? Of course, I am. Of course, I’m gonna resolve the issues of my own classroom” (February 22, p. 6). Cynthia echoed a similar reaction to this experience: “Don’t tell me, ‘I’ll take care of it.’ Then you’re just talking to me and not the parent. It has to be—you have to be fair” (February 22, p. 5).

These negative feelings and experiences appear to have been counterbalanced by those of indignation, pride, and a persistent desire to reclaim the teachers’ voice. Roy, the veteran, took a historical view as defense for subverting the administrators’ request for reporting questions rather than responding to them:

Our job, historically, as a teacher, is to be that person in communication with parents.

Listen, I’m in touch with my students’ parents, and sometimes parents ask similar

questions [of admins]: ‘Well, why is this happening?’ . . . And I respond, I don't care. I'm gonna respond because nobody else has the answer. Period. (Roy, February 22, p. 6)

Despite the expectation that teachers should not respond to parents’ questions about school policy, it seems that Roy recognized his power as an insider and professional, and responded anyway. This act of subtle subversion allowed Roy to reclaim his autonomy in this environment. Similarly, Roy described acting against the guidance of not giving out personal information to families, explaining: “My [students’] parents have my cell phone numbers. I don’t care” (Roy, January 25, p. 3).

Roy’s sense of himself as a professional revealed that, in spite of the limitations on how and where to teach in this context, some teachers found ways to assert their sense of self. Roy’s decision to give out both his cell phone number and to respond to questions about school policies indicates his level of trust in his judgment. Similarly, despite the overall consensus that the hyperconnected culture of the time was a source of anxiety, Cynthia was the only teacher who pushed back against that fear, saying, in addition to her fears and concerns: “I don’t mind being recorded, I don’t mind being watched. Let it come back to me, fine” (Cynthia, February 22, p. 6). Here, we see Roy and Cynthia potentially navigating the “emotional rules” of a school where power appears unevenly distributed and teachers’ emotions helped them develop resistance to systems and policies they find oppressive (Zembylas, 2004). These small instances of subversion belied cracks in the wall of disconnection. As Roy indicated, that wall would come down.

The wall of disconnection was neither impenetrable nor permanent. In the section above, I described thematically our teachers’ experiences with disconnection in an effort to define for the reader just what these educators were up against in their specific context. During the pandemic, it appeared these teachers experienced disconnection more than they experienced

connection. Disconnection abounded, from the evolving, digitally-oriented teaching context to the larger, culturally-mandated isolation for safety's sake. As such, for these teachers, given the boundaries to connection, it may be said they experienced the pursuit of connection more than the act of connection. In the next section of this chapter, I describe our teachers in pursuit of connection, including their pedagogical strategies, considerations of identity, historical experiences of connection, and the recurring connective themes of familiarity, novelty and just talking.

That Wall Will Come Down: Teachers in Pursuit of Connection

In this study, it seemed teachers described their pursuits of human connection in practical, historical, and philosophical terms. Connection was that which “reminds us that we are not ghosts. It reminds us that we are the living” (Arrastia, 2018, p. 247). Human connection is subversive, comprised of acts of care (Noddings, 1986/2013; Gilligan, 1982/2003) and love (Arrastia, 2018; hooks, 2001; Lanas & Zembylas, 2014) that reflect emotional knowledge (Jaggar, 1989; Nias, 1996; Hargreaves 1998; Zembylas 2007) in pursuit of freedom from the prevailing isolation of the on-going crisis of connection (Way et al., 2018). The participants in this study pursued connection in complex ways for complex purposes, positioning connection as something at times strategical, at other times in service of a larger humanization project. At still other times, connection was simultaneously a matter of strategy and humanization. In describing their connective orientations, some teachers seemingly revealed how they conceptually approached connection in their classrooms, including the ways they were influenced by former teachers who served as models for their own efforts. In the section that follows, I explore the common themes found in teachers' experiences in pursuit of connection. As with the larger groupings of these findings, the themes are titled with the words of the participants. They include

“A Matter of Maybe Pedagogical Strategy,” which centers teachers’ conceptions of connection; “They See You and You See Them,” which looks at the role of identity in connection; “All My Favorite Teachers Ever,” where participants share historical models of connection; and “Anything You Can Do,” which describes practical classroom methods adopted in pursuit of connection.

A Matter of Maybe Pedagogical Strategy. As we move into the next section, I want to revisit the epigraph that has guided this findings section. Roy said:

There is a wall between teachers and students. And that wall is going to be maintained if they don't feel that you can be humanized. If you can show that you're a real person, that wall will come down, and then they'll start listening to what you have to say. (Roy, January 25, p. 4).

Roy was primarily and pragmatically concerned with the relationship between human connection and student learning. Looking closely, however, he was also saying that you need connection in order to begin the process of student learning; that, without connection, students will not listen, which means they cannot hear you in any deeper sense of the word. Roy’s pursuit of connection through humanization for the purpose of student learning encapsulated one of the largest themes across the data, that of connection as pedagogical strategy.

The phrase “pedagogical strategy” came directly from Bruce’s explanation of his approach to connection. He shared, “Even if I’m including my own personal stories [with students], I feel like I’m doing so strategically to relate it to the content. Connecting, in my mind, is just a matter of maybe pedagogical strategy” (Bruce, March 8, p. 5). Bruce articulated the prevalent idea among these teachers that connection has a primarily functional element in the classroom. He went on to state more explicitly that he was attempting to connect “as a means to

an end. The only reason I'm sharing this [personal story] is because it's related to our topic" (Bruce, March 8, p. 5). Bruce's depiction of connection as pedagogical strategy provided language for other teachers who also pursued connection for practical ends.

Much like Bruce, and in the spirit of Roy's guiding pragmatism, Jennifer's theory of connection was firmly rooted in students' learning, part of which meant cultivating trust and taking down that wall: "That's been my teaching philosophy: day one, be their friend, gain their trust. So that when you ask them to do this problem, they'll do it" (Jennifer, February 8, p. 3). However, unlike Bruce, Jennifer was concerned that her content area—Algebra and Geometry—made it difficult to humanize herself and so, "it's hard to relate my content in that [personal] way, so I really just have to rely on myself; I share a lot of my personal life" (Jennifer, February 9, p. 3). In contrast to Bruce, who strategically humanized himself to make sense of his content, Jennifer's pursuit of connection took a more intimate form: "You're not supposed to be their friend, you're their teacher or whatever. But, I don't know. That's my goal first, because I feel like that's the only way they'll be open to my content" (Jennifer, February 8, p. 3). In fact, Jennifer's historical openness served as a metric for the level of connection she experienced during the pandemic, saying, "usually I'm further along in terms of sharing my personal life at this point in the year" (Jennifer, March 8, p. 5).

Interestingly, it was another math teacher, Caroline, who described her content area as a means of pursuing connections. Like Jennifer, Caroline recognized that mathematical concepts do not easily align with relevant or topical humanizing conversations: "What are we going to discuss? . . . 'Did you see that game with LeBron yesterday? The shot that he threw is a parabolic function.' They're gonna be like, 'Are you kidding me?'" (Caroline, February 8, p. 4). However, for Caroline, the potential for connection was not in sharing personally, but in being the best

teacher she can be. She explained: “I feel the best way that I can connect or be there for the kids is to just give them the content . . . I’m their teacher, I have to teach them” (Caroline, February 22, p. 5). For Caroline, connection was pursued through the act of teaching:

the best that I can do is to just be passionate about my craft or be passionate about me teaching and that will reflect that I care about your education as a student and thus show that I care about you. But, relationship wise, I’m not ‘How’s everything at home,’ and ‘I hope that you’re doing well.’ It’s just, ‘We’re going to make sure that you become successful academically,’ and that shows that I care. (Caroline, May 3, pp. 12–13)

While the kinds of relational teaching described by Roy, Bruce, and Jennifer centered on humanization of the teacher as a key to supporting students in class, Caroline was showing that connections can be made via one’s facility with teaching the content. For Caroline, care can be demonstrated in a pedagogical sense rather than a purely relational sense. Put another way, Caroline described a form of academic-relational caring in the vein of Noddings (1984/2013) and reminiscent of Delpit’s (2012) warm demanders. Caroline’s pursuit aligned with the notion that “the caring, the persistence, the pushing—all these create trust” (Delpit, 2012, p. 86) and, therefore, served to bring down that wall of disconnection. Additionally, her perspective added complexity to the theme of connection as pedagogical strategy. Whereas Roy, Bruce, and Jennifer explicitly aimed to take down the wall of disconnection through direct humanization via sharing personal stories and having informal conversations, Caroline’s insistence that students meet a high standard was also a strategic act that supported connection (Ross et al., 2012). As teachers strategized ways to connect with their students, it appears they came up against issues relating to identity. In the next section, I describe how teachers’ pursuits and experiences of

connection were influenced by facets of their gender expression, ethnicity, and community of residence.

They See You and You See Them. In addition to strategizing, several teachers also described how aspects of their identities played a factor in their experiences with connection. For those teachers in this study, their backgrounds—ethnicity, neighborhood, or alma mater—became a site of connection. For at least one, Bruce, it was a source of limited connection.

For Bruce, however, his experiences around historical gender expectations of masculinity limited his capacity to truly humanize himself before his students. He explained, “This unspoken rule still exists of men: you don’t talk about your feelings as much” (Bruce, March 8, p. 6). This lingering stereotypical and tragic idea about the stoic male was paired with a further troubling recognition that male teachers also “have to be extra careful” (Bruce, March 8, p. 8) that their emotional openness was not misconstrued as being “kind of a creep” (Bruce, March 8, p. 6). Bruce’s reluctance to be seen as a “creep” is reflected in the work of Berrill and Martino (2002), who examined issues of sexuality and masculinity in male teacher candidates and found that male teachers sought to keep an emotional distance from their students to avoid “being perceived as sexually suspect” (p. 60) and who feared transgressing “perceived limits of acceptable hegemonic heterosexual masculinity” (p. 60). Similarly, Martino and Frank (2006) recognized how expectations of hegemonic masculinity led male teachers to police their behaviors and pedagogical practices to meet the expectations of their male students in a single-sex school. In addition, Parr and Gosse (2011) found that male teachers were vulnerable to accusations of inappropriate conduct. For Bruce, the implication of these studies was that his efforts to avoid being seen as “sexually suspect” and to be “extra careful” reflected both the pandemic’s hyperconnected virtual context and the larger cultural ideas around masculinity and power.

Bruce's concerns about perceptions of masculinity were seconded by Caroline, who said, "I don't envy the guys . . . I completely agree that you guys have to deal with more and take more precautions than we do [as women]" (Caroline, March 8, p. 8).

Interestingly, Bruce's concerns about being a "creep" were shared in context of being seen this way around or by female students. In another instance of using his gender to connect, however, Bruce described adopting more stereotypical ideas of masculinity to forge connections with male students. He explained how adhering to these norms allowed him to connect with a specific sub-set of his students: "the kids that don't really buy-in are the quote/unquote 'cool jock kids' who aren't used to seeing a male English teacher" (Bruce, January 25, p. 1). Recognizing the potential for disconnection around students' perceptions of his masculinity, Bruce explained feeling "like I have to overcome that sort of strange image in their minds" (Bruce, January 25, p. 1) which he did, again, strategically: "I kind of talk about sports and all that hyper masculine stuff so that they can see, oh, there's an English teacher that reads but watches football and stuff" (Bruce, January 25, pp. 1–2). Bruce's experiences with connection, therefore, reflected a complex negotiation of gendered norms assumed by both him and, potentially, his students. Whereas he was able to use code-switching in his classroom (Lin, 2013) in order to connect with the "cool jock kids," he disconnected somewhat from his female students to appease his fears of being seen by female students as a "creep."

Bruce described his experiences of connection as a pedagogical strategy that also had gendered expectations around emotionality and sexuality which limited his capacity for deeper connections. Factoring in the larger accountability context of the pandemic, we can understand Bruce's desire to protect himself. While he may be reifying expectations of hegemonic masculinity in the process, in the hyperconnected pandemic, Bruce's identity is a site of

connection and disconnection. Bruce's experiences revealed a complex interplay of gendered identity. No other teachers described gender's influence in their experiences of connection. However, for Cynthia and Caroline, sharing a common ethnic background and hailing from common neighborhoods were sites of connection during the pandemic.

A self-identified Asian woman teaching a student body consisting of nearly 10% Asian students, Cynthia found that sharing a common ethnic background with many of her students was a benefit: "I am a minority and I'm teaching in that kind of a field where you are the same, and they don't look at you any different, it is a blessing" (Cynthia, March 8, p. 8). She added later "it's important that, as a teacher, they see you and you see them" (Cynthia, March 8, p. 8). Cynthia's experience reflected the larger calls for more teachers of color in the school system in order to ensure that students have role models who reflect the diversity of their schools and communities (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Further, teachers of color can help break the cycle of systemic racism that perpetuates white supremacy in schools and the larger culture (Kohli, 2008). Seeing students and being seen was something Caroline and Jennifer also understood as valuable to connection.

Caroline felt that a shared background was important to understanding and connecting with students:

I know a teacher who teaches for [a local urban district], and saying that they just cannot deal with it, they can't handle it, and they can't connect with the kids at all. And I understand that, but I grew up in that type of neighborhood, I grew up in that town. So, I understand the dynamics of the culture and the community. So, it probably would be easier for me to connect with those kids, because I came from that type of urban environment. And it's normal for me. So, that's me having something in common with the

kids, [it] would be a little bit easier for me to connect, where somebody that felt like an outsider . . . how hard is that going to be for you? (Caroline, March 8, p. 8)

Additionally, Jennifer's identity as alumna of the school in which she teaches supported her efforts at connection: "As a [Gateway] grad, I feel like that's a huge advantage for me. I can relate to them because I've had some of the same teachers. I am a product of this high school" (Jennifer, March 8, p. 8). The power of this connection was felt deeply, with Jennifer claiming "I have a connection even before meeting them" (Jennifer, March 8, pp. 6–7). Implicit in Jennifer's sense of a pre-connection are the previously stated experiences of shared cultural identity and sharing a common neighborhood: Gateway students have historically had to apply to the school and live within specific municipalities in the area. Therefore, being an alumna of the school indicates that Jennifer not only attended the school, but that she grew up in the same neighborhood and can relate to the students as students, not only as a teacher.

All My Favorite Teachers Ever. Some teachers' backgrounds influenced their pursuit of connection beyond identity. Several teachers described looking back to historical models of connection as they attempted to forge their own during the pandemic. In this section, I describe the influences of prior models of connection on these teachers' efforts.

Looking back on her previous math teachers, Caroline was inspired by teachers who "were challenging, and they pushed you, and they push you because they're showing you that they care. And they're letting you know, through their actions and their teaching methods, that they want you to do better, because they care about you" (Caroline, February 8, p. 4). In college, too, Caroline felt drawn to models of rigor as care:

some of them were my favorite teachers. And I felt I connected with them because they were super hard on me academically. They didn't strike up a relationship with me or ask

me how my sister's doing or what's going on at home. And they were a hard-ass on me. And they were really difficult. And I appreciated them for that. And I felt that we connected, or I appreciated them for that, because they were there for me academically. (Caroline, May 3, p. 12)

Recalling Caroline's perspective on content area as site of connection, one can see the clear path of influence from her prior educators' efforts. Like other teachers in this study, she adopted and recalled practices that spoke to—and helped define—her approach to connection during the pandemic.

Caroline's experiences with former teachers who demonstrated care through their academic expectations were similar to those of other participants in the group. Sophia recalled a former memorable teacher who "cared about us enough to say, 'I know you struggled on this. I want you to know the answer for tomorrow'" (Sophia, February 8, p. 3). She recalled another teacher whose presence alone fostered a desire for students to be successful "not even for the purpose of the grade, but just because we cared about how he thought about us. We wanted to do well for him, not necessarily for the class, just from his personality alone" (Sophia, February 8, p. 3). Sophia's model teacher reflected Caroline's conception of connection as a "warm demander" (Delpit, 2012) and someone whose insistence on excellence creates a psychologically safe space that begets connections (Ross et al., 2012). Cynthia, too, appreciated academically-oriented, high-standard-bearing models of connection: "I think the best math teachers were the ones who not only challenged us, but made us feel smart. Like they made me feel like, 'Oh, I got 100 on this test, hey, I could do this'" (Cynthia, February 8, p. 3). There was also an element of academic care, similar to what Sophia and Caroline experienced, which stayed with Cynthia, where her teachers said, "'look, you got this wrong. Google it, think about why you got it wrong,

and come back to me again.’ That message just says so much about the student’s potential; you believe in them and you’re not giving up” (Cynthia, February 8, pp. 3–4).

Reflecting her approach to pedagogical strategy, Jennifer modeled her efforts on mentors who shared freely of their personal lives, an experience she valued as a student and consciously replicated later on: “that’s the common thread for all my favorite teachers ever: even in the classes that I probably I didn’t really learn a lot in, I still remember them, because they took the time to have personal conversations” (Jennifer, February 8, p. 3). Ryan echoed this sentiment in recalling his models of connection, too: “We don’t really remember the learning aspect of it, but we remember the teacher” (Ryan, February 8, p. 1). Both Ryan and Jennifer appear to have described the value of teachers’ being able to humanize their lives as something that lasts beyond the classroom’s content material, indicating that potentially what matters for some students is not the subject-matter, but the person in the room with them.

Recognizing the influence of former teachers aligned with the oft-cited findings of Dan Lortie (1975/2002), who coined the phrase “apprenticeship-of-observation” which noted that new teachers (and teacher education students) tend to draw from their experiences as students as they consider what and how to teach. As Lortie (1975/2002) summarized, for many teachers, “What constitutes good teaching then constitutes good teaching now” (p. 66). For the teachers in this study of connections during the pandemic, many of the teachers seem to have looked to what worked for them as students in order to determine how to proceed. For instance, Kelly recalled an English teacher who “engaged the heart. She made it fun. And I’ll never forget her Shakespeare lessons. I mean, it was very communal. We sat in a circle and I got the sense that she felt like she was learning from us too; it was fun for her” (Kelly, February 8, p. 3). Kelly’s teacher exemplified a capacity to get students to cover the content while also feeling present and

connected with her students in a “communal” space. Kelly recalled fondly both the teacher and her capacity as an effective instructor. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Kelly recalled a teachers’ “communal” approach during a time of extreme isolation. There were significant barriers to Kelly’s capacity to mimic the kind of communal classroom during the pandemic (i.e., the wall of disconnection). And so, Kelly’s recollection demonstrated that when she and the other participants delved into this reflective mode they expanded their search for practical and theoretical guides vis-à-vis the apprenticeship-of-observation to include elements of nostalgia as a way of finding solace in a more comforting past. While Lortie (1975) posited the dangers in attempting to teach from a distorted past, nostalgia has been part of the mechanism for teachers resisting change and it can help develop both individual and collective identities (Umarik & Goodson, 2020). Nostalgia and memory were also connective points between the participants in this study, as they collectively looked back on more historical experiences in the district. I expand on this theme later in the chapter, when I examine the participants’ experiences of connection as a community.

These teachers’ historical models of connection provided a glimpse into their unique ideas around what connection looks like both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, such as Caroline and Jennifer, there were clear connections between their historical experiences as students and their practical approaches as teachers during the pandemic. Ryan, rather than acknowledging any one teacher, recalled the ways that teachers in general can linger in a student’s memory as a human rather than as a technician. Kelly demonstrated that some teachers returned to the comfort of historical models amid the highly stressful and tumultuous nature of the pandemic teaching moment. Reflecting on their past also appears to have provided a place of connection to the group, as teachers revealed more about their lives, character, and

values—aspects of their autobiography which may have supported connection (Kelchtermans, 1996; Nias, 1996). This added to a larger sense of connection experienced by the group, a theme to which I return later. In the next section, building upon teachers’ reflections on connective practices they experienced, I turn to the application of common practices teachers described using in virtual- and hybrid-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anything You Can Do. Once again, the veteran perspective of Roy helped guide my findings. He pleaded with the group early on to connect at all costs for the benefit of the students: “Anything you can do—anything you can do—to open these kids up and get them to relax a little” (Roy, January 25, p. 5). Throughout the study, teachers described a range of practices they employed in pursuit of connection. While the larger themes above take a macro-level view of the findings, the following sub-themes collectively fall into three thematic approaches to connection: familiarity, novelty, and just talking. In this section of the chapter, I describe the relevant practices teachers pursued in their efforts to take down the ever-present wall of disconnection.

Familiarity. Familiarity was hard to find during the pandemic, particularly for teachers whose classrooms were intangible and whose long-standing practices were rendered impossible in the virtual and hybrid setting. Still, there was something to be said about the power of routine, and three teachers in this study pursued connection by evoking a sense of familiarity. As noted in a prior section above, Caroline’s approach to connection was primarily rooted in her capacity to teach the content. Accordingly, when describing her practices for connection, she asserted the value of consistency. In her words, “my way of showing them that I’m there for them is that we’re doing what we need to do” (Caroline, February 22, p. 5). By maintaining a high standard for learning despite the circumstances, she provided a form of familiarity to her students.

Interestingly, Caroline's approach to providing familiarity was validated by her students. After surveying her students' needs, she found that "their concerns were not so much about my concerns, which were . . . connection and their emotional health. They were just more nervous about the content" (Caroline, February 22, p. 5). As such, by "doing what we need to do," Caroline was potentially able to provide her students with a kind of academic stability and familiarity through rigor that may otherwise have been lacking in the altered school paradigm.

Bruce also sought to provide students with a sense of familiarity through a practice he termed "mental trickery," which he described as attempting to "make them feel like they're learning something" (Bruce, February 8, p. 3). To do this, Bruce would ask students in his virtual classroom to copy notes from a Google Slide or do other rote activities he felt were common school-specific tasks. In his words,

doing that periodically, I think, gives them the illusion that they're in the classroom. And that feeling—I don't know, I'm not a scientist; I'm not a behavioral psychologist, I don't know what effect this is ultimately having—I'm just assuming that this gives them that illusion-slash-regularity that, in many ways, contributes to learning. (Bruce, February 8, p. 3)

Although Bruce was uncertain of the effect or validity of his practice, he maintained the perspective that the familiarity or "regularity" made it a worthwhile pursuit. Given that the entire school system was now a facsimile of what it once was, a practice of "mental trickery" seemed apt, particularly when done in the service of providing students with a safe, more familiar experience. Additionally, while Bruce described aiming to bring students back to a time in their education when things looked and felt more ordinary, he may have also tapped into students' experiences of anxiety through synchronous learning (Tien et al., 2023). By asking students to

solitarily copy notes from a Google Slide deck, as opposed to engaging in more nuanced active learning, he may have chosen a less robust teaching method in favor of a practice that appeared to reduce students' anxiety by allowing them to focus on something other than their own faces on the screen (Tien et al., 2023).

Yessica brought a daily journaling practice from before the pandemic into her virtual and hybrid classroom. As she described it: "When I hold my [Google] Meets, my students have a do-now and the do-now every single day is one of these [journal] prompts and it takes like two minutes and the kids love it" (Yessica, January 25, p. 1). According to Yessica, the prompts asked students simple but personal things, such as "list the activities you'd do if you weren't so afraid, or list all the rivers you've crossed; list all the things you've built with your hands" (Yessica, January 25, p. 1). Describing why she decided to use this existing practice during the pandemic, she said: "We need this human element into (sic) teaching. I'm going through this just like you; I'm struggling just as much as you" (Yessica, January 25, p. 1). Yessica, much like her peers, looked to use proven, strategic connective pedagogical practices for the sake of humanization during the pandemic. In this way, she was able to draw on existing funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2005) of practice and what worked in the school community to build connections in the virtual/hybrid setting.

Yessica's daily journaling activity seems to have helped her connect to her students in a brief, personal exercise at the start of class. Notably, the daily writing prompts she described were not always explicitly related to the day's lessons. Similarly, several other teachers reported going beyond the curriculum in pursuit of connection. Even Caroline, who viewed connection as her capacity to teach her students well and maintain high standards, sought time just to connect

with her students on a more relational level. The practices and approaches were varied in interesting ways, reflecting a range of novel approaches to connection.

As noted, Caroline did go beyond her subject-matter in order to connect with her students. Still initially rooted to the curriculum, Caroline set aside one day per week for open discussions: “I give them that Friday time during class to come in and ask questions or talk. And what I've found is the kids are coming in on Fridays, not even to ask questions about math concepts, but they just want to talk” (Caroline, January 25, p. 2). It is in keeping with her philosophy and experience that some of Caroline’s connective moments with students came under the guise of content area help. That the students came not for help but for someone to talk with spoke to the level of isolation they were experiencing. That Caroline was willing to continue to keep up this practice, even though it was clearly not all about the material, also spoke to her capacity to balance connection on a personal and intellectual level.

Novelty. Other teachers went far beyond the curricular boundaries to connect with their students during the pandemic. When Kelly recognized that her students were feeling the weight of the moment in January, in an act of solidarity she effectively cancelled her class for a mindfulness lesson:

so rather than have them log into class, I posted some meditations. And . . . their assignment was to write down 10 things that make them happy, 10 gratitudes. And then they had to take a walk, and just write about what their walk was like. And they loved it. They said, ‘I haven't been out of the house in a month. So, it was nice to just get out and walk.’ I forget, they need those kinds of breaks too. (Kelly, January 25, p. 2)

It is a sordid reminder of the bleakness of pandemic life when students find novelty in simply going outside. Kelly’s decision to forego whatever her lesson plans called for and instead

encourage her students to get out of their heads and into their bodies, to get out of their homes and into the world, proved to be an effective, novel approach to connection.

Roy, who taught music production, took his students into the realm of strategy: “My kids are doing chess now . . . we just did a chess tournament on Friday” (Roy, January 25, p. 5). Somewhat similarly to Yessica, Ryan built a non-curricular routine into his days. The history teacher explained how, at the start of each class: “I play music. I pick something from somewhere, different genre each time, and see if the kids like it” (Ryan, February 8, p. 2). Roy and Ryan’s approaches to novelty reflect a sense of play in the virtual classroom, a rare but important occurrence for adolescents (Honeyford & Boyd, 2015). Pursuing connection via games and music appears to have reflected those teachers’ commitment to connecting in novel ways for their students’ benefit.

Another novelty that may also be seen as an attempt to reconcile the stress of a hyperconnected context was bringing students into the lived reality of the teacher. For example, Ryan used his Google Meet time to get outside and cook for his pupils: “I was talking about this weekend, we found bacon ends, and how good it was, and I’m outside and I’m cooking bacon” (Ryan, March 8, p. 4). Bringing students into his backyard and cooking in front of them were not in the state’s history standards, nor were these experiences something Ryan’s pre- or post-pandemic students were likely to encounter in a brick-and-mortar classroom.

Cynthia, too, brought students into her world in a novel way. As a mother to a toddler, Cynthia had to balance her teaching schedule with the needs of her young child. Cynthia accepted her reality and made her family part of her class, a move that humanized her perhaps more than anything else reported in this study:

I have a son and, you've seen, he's all over me during my class. So, I am as real as I can get with him. Like: “listen, guys, he's screaming bloody murder, right now, check this out!” And I'll turn my camera and then he's on top of me, or behind me, or hugging me (Cynthia, January 25, p. 2)

Cynthia was forced by the context to reconcile her roles as mother and educator. Rather than try to hide this tension in the name of professionalism, Cynthia embraced it and brought the struggle to the classroom, simultaneously humanizing herself and providing her students with the novel experience of a toddler shrieking during their math class. Taylor et al. (2014) described how the discomfort that comes with showing vulnerability with graduate students helped build more authentic relationships. Further, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers balanced multiple roles as parents and educators, a task which at times exacerbated their struggles with mental health and well-being (Ancho, 2023).

In addition to the work around embracing her own vulnerabilities and modeling the multiple demands put upon working women, particularly during the pandemic, by bringing her son into the virtual classroom, Cynthia may have evoked her students' empathy. Mary Gordon (2018), who founded the Roots of Empathy program in 1996, has shown through her research that affective empathy can be caught, not taught. Gordon's work with the Roots of Empathy project brings a parent and their baby to a classroom once per month for the duration of the school year. Her research has shown how interacting with babies helps develop empathy in teachers and students alike, particularly evoking prosocial behaviors like helping and caring in boys (Gordon, 2018). In contrast to the hyperconnected intrusions of parents in their students' classrooms, Cynthia's son intruding in hers humanized her and, potentially, sparked a moment of affective empathy in some students.

In a less intimate but no less novel or profound way, Jennifer facilitated a novel practice unique to the virtual/hybrid setting. Throughout the year, Jennifer recognized that her freshman students were not engaging with the class material or with one another in any familiar or meaningful way. In her attempts at trying to have informal discussions she noted, “the freshmen are often kind of shy to start that conversation” (Jennifer, January 25, p. 1). Going further, Jennifer recognized that students’ historical connections to one another happened in the spaces beyond many teachers’ control:

when the kids are in school, a lot of these connections are happening outside of our classrooms. They're happening on the bus, they're happening at their lockers, they're happening at the lunch table. It's not in our classrooms alone. And so, that time is the time they're missing for socialization. (Jennifer, March 8, p. 6)

Given the limitations of the students throughout this school year—virtual learning on their own; hybrid learning in small groups while masked and seated three feet apart—Jennifer decided to get on the students’ level: “I've been trying to encourage them to use the chat more, kind of like chatting in class. Even if it's unrelated to the topic, I encourage them to do that” (Jennifer, March 8, p. 6). She continued: “Equating it with the ways one would use a group chat, she suggested students “use the chat, just kind of in the little way that we do, like: ‘LOL,’ ‘ah,’ you know, just little things; use emojis if you want” (Jennifer, May 3, p. 11).

In terms of novelty, it may be said that encouraging students to chat during class time in any context was not an ordinary teaching practice. This practice initially stood out as novelty for the juxtaposition it created against traditional conceptions of what classroom management should look like. Then again, the classrooms in this study looked nothing like what students or teachers were accustomed to seeing. This pursuit of connection via chatting, then, revealed a depth of care

and concern for her students as well as a confidence in herself as a teacher who would allow students to spend class time occupied with something other than her course materials. Further, it reflected the ways that some teachers yielded to the circumstances of virtual and hybrid teaching instead of fighting against them. Just as Caroline put aside one day per week for personal conversations, and Ryan cooked with his students, and Cynthia put her screaming toddler on the screen, these practices represented a deep form of humanization, one that was novel in the context and would also be considered novel, or at least memorable, under more ordinary circumstances. The teachers who described leaning into the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and embraced the novelty could be said to have enacted aspects of a pedagogy of vulnerability which reflects “a desire to connect across differences, to speak from the heart, and to add an emotional and spiritual dimension to the learning experience” (Brantmeier & McKenna, 2020, p. 4). During the COVID-19 pandemic, through their actions described above, these teachers appear to have embodied the essence of vulnerability given by Brené Brown (2015) who sees it as “having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome” (p. 4).

Embracing vulnerability looked like stepping up in the virtual and hybrid classroom and taking a pedagogical, pragmatic risk. These novel approaches reflected vulnerability but also indicated a deep desire to make humanizing connections in the classroom. This, it appeared, was the simplest goal of connection, and one that did not require the novelty of class-time chatting or toddlers on the screen or bacon in the yard. Indeed, the most prevalent practice in pursuit of connection was also the simplest: “just talking” allowed some teachers and students to be vulnerable by being open and speaking from the heart.

Just Talking. The phrase “just talk” (and its variant “just talking”) came up 18 times in the transcripts and was uttered at least once each by Bruce, Roy, Kelly, Cynthia, and Sophia. In most instances, it appeared that the teachers were advocating for, or reflecting on, the act of simply getting to know their students. As expected in this context, even this simple act was a struggle. As noted in the findings on disconnection, it appeared that students did not frequently engage with their teachers or peers in any meaningful way during virtual or hybrid learning. It was hard to converse with someone in a digital classroom when their camera was off and they were reduced to a thumbnail image. Simple though it may appear, just talking did not come easily. However, it did appear to be a valued ideal shared by many teachers, and one that came with its own complexities in its pursuit and function.

Several teachers seem to have experienced the difficulty of getting students to talk in class, and they came up with unique approaches to the task. Bruce, for example, took up the act of “going first”:

whenever I ask a question and I don't get any response, I say, ‘Okay, I'll go first.’ And then I respond to my question. And then something weird happens: they start responding to my answer, which ultimately results in them responding to the question, because it's a form of the answer. (Bruce, April 19, p. 9)

Jennifer also undertook a version of “going first” to engage reluctant students. She described how even a simple conversation around a students’ weekend required such a maneuver:

if I say, ‘How's everyone's weekend,’ I don't necessarily get a response, because the freshmen are often kind of shy to start that conversation. But if I say, ‘Oh, I started watching this show,’ or ‘I went to go eat at this place,’ then it usually gives them that

starting point, and makes them feel a little more comfortable hearing something from me personally, and then feeling that comfort to share whatever they have on their minds.

(Jennifer, January 25, p. 1)

Additionally, Roy took a similar “going first” approach to initiating conversations with his students, explaining: “I tell them a little bit a little about me, because I don’t want them to be the ones on the spot. You know, they like to feel like I’m at least on the same plane with them in terms of us being in this environment together” (Roy, January 25, p. 2).

For those teachers looking to humanize themselves through conversation, the virtual learning context during a pandemic was a boundary but the pursuit appeared to have been simple enough to be worthwhile. The pursuit of conversations appeared to be a common point of connection for teachers and students during the pandemic, as it is during an ordinary school year (Ketch, 2011). Nearly every teacher pursued or experienced some form of “just talking.” During her optional Friday virtual class meetings, Caroline’s students “just want[ed] to come in and talk to each other” (Caroline, January 25, p. 3). For Sophia, sacrificing class time to understand her students struggles led to an enlightening conversation: “we literally just spent the entire 25 minutes [of class time] just talking to each other. And I feel like I connected more with them in those 25 minutes” (Sophia, March 8, p. 8). Kelly, too, advocated for talking, encouraging her peers early on “to take that time [and] give them a space to have fun and just talk about what they want to talk about” (Kelly, January 25, p. 2).

As with many things experienced during the pandemic, the simple and common approach to just talking revealed complexities and obstacles specific to the context. It seems clear that many of our teachers may have found value in the simple, common practice of conversation with their students. As an inquiry group, these teachers may also have found value in the

conversations they had amongst themselves. “Just talking” was a common theme for those teachers pursuing connection with their students, and it was nearly all the participants had to connect with each other as peers during this study. In the section that follows, I demonstrate how the teachers in this group formed a community together, connecting with one another through dialogue that included demonstrations of vulnerability, exploring our feelings in the context, and finding solidarity under the weight of the ordeal.

Start Listening: Teachers in Community

Understanding these teachers’ experiences in pursuit of connection during the pandemic revealed the participants’ complex lived experiences. In the sections above, I first outlined the wall of disconnection before describing the pursuits of connection undertaken by teachers in an effort to overcome the wall of disconnection during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following section, I present the teachers’ experiences as part of the professional inquiry group that comprised this study. I initially set out to understand teachers’ experiences with connection during the pandemic. While part of my research question included queries around how teachers connected with peers, I had not expected the extent to which the inquiry group itself provided the participants a space to connect. Together, the teachers in this group variously demonstrated vulnerability, expressed deep emotions, and revisited historical grievances with the community. In the end, the participants described the implications of their experiences teaching during the pandemic on their future practice and how they had changed as individuals. In a time and space where some teachers felt voiceless, this group appears to have given participants a space to express their feelings about policies and the larger context in which they worked—before and during COVID-19—often seeking solidarity and comfort in their shared experiences.

I Didn't Know What I Was Doing Wrong. During the pandemic, teachers experienced emotional burnout and an overall decrease in mental health and well-being (Kim et al., 2021). Teachers, at that time, also experienced heightened levels of worry and low life satisfaction (Lacomba-Trejo et al., 2022). Still, teachers cultivated resilience and positivity through job resources such as social support (Kim et al., 2021). Accordingly, the welcoming space of this study's Google Meets, which gathered familiar faces in from the isolated world of the pandemic, may have been a source of social support that cultivated connection. Several teachers' experiences suggested that they were looking for a safe space to share their overflowing emotions with people who could empathize with their vulnerability and share their emotional knowledge.

Barely a month into the study, Caroline hit an emotional boiling point due to the ongoing disconnection she experienced. Let us recall an evocative moment of disconnection:

I feel that disconnect, and it does take an effect on—I'm exhausted already. I feel like I'm just staring at screens and staring at their little thumbnails. I'm just frustrated. I'm tired of looking at those stupid Pokémon things! I'm over it. Turn on your cameras, I want to look at you! I'm feeling defeated in that sense. So, I don't know. I'm over this year. That's it.

I'm done. I'm done with virtual learning. (Caroline, February 22, pp. 5–6)

It is worth repeating this moment here as an example of Caroline stepping into her vulnerability. This was a highly illustrative moment as she shared the range of emotions she had been experiencing: exhaustion, frustration, and defeat. In this instance, Caroline spoke for nearly eight minutes. And, when it was over, Kelly offered some solace in the form of perspective:

I think, generally, this is the February slump time. Even in a normal situation where the students are feeling the slump, the mid-year slump. And we're feeling the mid-year slump, and I think it's just compounded by this pandemic. (Kelly, February 22, p. 4)

Rather than an effort to dismiss her peer, Kelly appears to have been attempting to refer to historical norms for Caroline while also acknowledging that the norm was, in fact, not normal in this context. The exchange here seems to have reflected a form of care that the teachers developed as members in this group, and that kind of care allowed folks to continue to be vulnerable together.

To return to another previously cited example, when Bruce shared with the group his concerns around his intentions being misinterpreted as a young, male teacher, he added: “I didn't know what I was doing wrong. I felt very on edge. I felt constricted . . . It just made me feel more conscious of my actions” (Bruce, March 8, p. 6). Again, it appeared that Bruce was trusting his peers to hold his emotions with him, and to allow him the space to share his fears, to relive and make sense of a troubling experience together.

Near the end of the study, Roy made an emotional confession about his fears and ongoing discomfort with the pandemic and the changes to the schedule:

in the beginning of the year, it made me really uncomfortable to not be around the kids, and I missed them. And I missed teaching in the classroom; that made me really uncomfortable. And I had to adapt to the whole virtual environment. And then, when the kids came back to hybrid, I felt like that made me uncomfortable too. (Roy, June 7, p. 20)

Jennifer and Yessica also were open about their discomfort around returning to campus and being around students again. Around one month before the April return to hybrid learning, Jennifer asked the group, “Is anyone else concerned about the amount of kids that they're going

to see in their room” (Jennifer, March 8, p. 4). Similarly, Yessica, who was pregnant at the time, asked several questions around the teachers’ and students’ return to campus at our next meeting:

Are you concerned about those numbers? Sixteen students in a room with you? Does that worry you guys? . . . Did you guys, when you had students back in September, October, in class, did you clean the desks after they left the room and clean the doorknobs in between every class, too? (Yessica, March 22, p. 5)

Practical as her concerns were, Yessica seemed willing to bring these questions to the group to seek solace, advice, and feedback from professionals but also as humans coping with the same extraordinary challenge.

Additionally, Ryan offered a brief moment of quiet but profound vulnerability. On the final day of the study, as we looked back on what we learned during our time together, Ryan offered this self-realization in the chat: “it is easier to talk to students than to my peers” (Ryan, June 7, chat). Although present at nearly every meeting, Ryan appeared to be more of a listener than speaker. For him to acknowledge this at the tail-end of the study may have indicated that he felt a level of comfort with his peers by then, as he was able to acknowledge and embrace that reality as his own. One explanation for Ryan’s quiet vulnerability may be found in the work of Geert Kelchtermans (1996) who found that teachers used autobiographical reflection and storytelling as effective strategies to cope with the range of political and moral vulnerabilities of teachers. Ryan also appears to have demonstrated how the safety and support of teacher inquiry groups helped him address emotional aspects of his identity (Gillis & Mitton-Kukner, 2019).

Vulnerability, then, was a prominent theme in the findings around teacher connections. For those teachers who demonstrated a capacity for vulnerability and emotionality with their peers, it may have been that the traumatic context of the pandemic forced some teachers to

embrace their emotional knowledge and validate their emotional experiences in ways necessary to cope with the stresses of the virtual and hybrid teaching context. Indeed, research supports the idea that social support factored into teachers' sense of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fox & Walter, 2022; Kim et al., 2021). Further, it makes logical sense that a group of teachers selected for a study on connection were willing to do the things that make connections, including demonstrating vulnerability, as they came together in community. In addition to, or perhaps as a result of, the vulnerability teachers felt safe enough to display, teachers also described learning from one another. In the next section, "I Learned Something from All of You," I review the teachers' experiences of mutual admiration and collaborative learning.

I Learned Something From All of You. Teacher learning and teacher knowledge, in its various iterations, has been a vital concern for teacher educators and the larger culture for at least forty years (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Nation at Risk, 1982). Throughout their careers, teacher learning happens initially through coursework and internships and, later, through professional development and real-time work situations (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991). A vital aspect of the teacher experience, teacher learning appeared to be a site of connection for the participants in this study. More specifically, teachers seemed willing to step into their vulnerabilities and act as supportive resources from their peers and they described learning from each other throughout the group's meetings. At times explicit, other times implicit, teachers described developing their teaching repertoires (Grossman et al., 2009) and feeling less isolated from one another during this study, further demonstrating the connective power of the inquiry group.

For some teachers, the group provided the opportunity to learn that they were not alone in their struggles around choosing appropriate practices in the pandemic teaching context. As they

shared their experiences, Yessica said, simply, it was “interesting to see, and to hear, everyone’s different perspectives on what other teachers have done” (Yessica, February 8, p. 3). Individuals sharing perspectives led to some teachers finding solace in the common struggles that existed regardless of whether a participant was a novice or veteran teacher. Bruce marveled at that lesson:

I'm learning that even in year nine, or however [long] you guys have been teaching, that the same issues and barriers to connecting [exist] that I face now. I thought [they] were more so because I'm inexperienced, but I think I was finding that . . . it continues on, and it's a constant thing that we have to keep in mind. (Bruce, June 7, p. 12)

This was supported by Kelly, who reminded Bruce: “The other thing I learned was how important it is to interact with teachers of all levels of experience. I learned something from all of you” (Kelly, June 7, chat). Teachers learning from peers has been said to take place along a continuum (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and learning in situated practice can be understood in various conceptual ways (Lampert, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the words of the participants above, teachers seem to have learned that years of experience with connection did not matter in the pandemic teaching context. Bruce, who at this time was in his fourth year of teaching, and Kelly, who had nearly two decades of experience, both may have seen the value in sharing their practices and perspectives as professionals in community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Wenger, 1998). This reflects the kind of survival-mode innovation required by some teachers during the pandemic (Loose & Ryan, 2020).

Within this capacity to learn from each other was also a sentiment that some teachers wanted to be around their colleagues more often. Roy stated, “Personally, I think I need more interaction from colleagues. I think we need to talk more” (Roy, June 7, p. 20). Once again

adopting “just talking” as a form of connection, this time with his peers, Roy’s interest in reconnecting was shared by others. Notably, Bruce echoed Roy’s sentiment:

what I learned about myself is how much I need this. Because, as a teacher, you just feel so isolated, and that maybe you're the only one going through something, or experiencing something. So, I think having this group to come to and talk about these things, makes me feel less alone in that. (Bruce, June 7, p. 12)

Teachers felt isolated from peers and students during the pandemic, which led to diminished mental health and well-being (Reich et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Lacomba-Trejo, 2022).

Bruce’s positioning of the group as a force to counteract that isolation reflected the depth of his experiences during the pandemic, while also recognizing a larger truth that teacher isolation has led to burnout even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Schlichte et al., 2010).

Similarly, in a push against the prevailing isolation both in and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, Ryan described how the hybrid-learning context, particularly at the end of the school year, left space for more peer-to-peer learning and connecting: “I think this is the perfect time to be doing this, since all the kids are gone by 1:30 [p. m.]. There [are] so many opportunities to be able to meet up with different groups, and prepare for next year” (Ryan, May 17, p. 5).

Ryan, like his peers, wanted to spend more time together—to connect and plan. While Kelly, Bruce and Roy were looking back on their experiences during the pandemic, Ryan acknowledged that the future will need attending to as well. Ryan’s optimism demonstrated his positive learning experiences in this group and his own desire to be prepared for a post-COVID world (Ravitch, 2020). There was also a desire to connect with the larger Gateway community, a thematic finding which I analyze further in a section below.

Teacher learning was not limited to sharing practices and perspectives. As members of a community of inquiry, a reflective spirit meant that some teachers also looked inwards and learned lessons about themselves throughout this project (Palmer, 1998/2017; Pardales & Girod, 2013). One of the most prominent themes in the data around self-reflection focused largely around teachers' approaches to coping with uncertainty. Sophia realized while attempting to teach virtually and in hybrid setting during the pandemic that it is “okay to roll with the punches. And not panic and not worry, especially if you're a very Type-A type of person. It's okay to just let it be, especially this year” (Sophia, June 7, p. 15). In this excerpt, Sophia acknowledged that she is a “Type-A type of person,” implying a personality marked by competitiveness, sense of urgency, and impatience (McLeod, 2023). This type of personality may have conflicted with the perpetually evolving nature of teaching during the pandemic, leading to her experiences of distress. Several other teachers appeared to have experienced similar stress and described how they coped with it by examining the self-imposed expectations they held for themselves as educators.

Yessica acknowledged how aspects of her personality added to the stress of teaching in the pandemic:

I put a lot of pressure on myself as an educator. And one of the major takeaways that I had to adapt to was that it's okay to not get to everything. And to just do what you can, it's okay to not be perfect. (Yessica, June 7, p. 7)

For Yessica, her inability to “get to everything” reflected both a concern with meeting the state standards during limited instructional time in the pandemic and a struggle to satisfy her own desire to “be perfect.” Like Sophia, the chaotic pandemic context forced her to reconcile and,

ultimately, release that imposition in order to alleviate her stress. Kelly, too, described how self-imposed pressures were understood differently after teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I've always put so much pressure on myself to feel like I had to know everything. And . . . I think I need to hold on to that. It's okay to not be perfect; it's okay to not have all the answers (Kelly, June 7, p. 10)

Experiences with perfectionism took on different forms. Jennifer described coming to understand herself in an important way during the pandemic: “A big thing that I definitely worked on is being more confident in myself as a teacher, because I found that I relied a lot on validation from the students” (Jennifer, June 7, p. 13). For Jennifer, in the comparative silence of the virtual classroom, where some teachers resorted to novel practices in order to help students engage during synchronous class time, the lack of consistent and loop seemingly led her to recognize how much her sense of self-efficacy lived within the student’s experiences. Similarly, Cynthia appeared to have found that her emotional experiences in the classroom were also tied to the students’ actions or inactions, recognizing that “I don't [need] to always take it personal, especially when the kids are failing or not doing the work” (Cynthia, June 7, chat). Like Jennifer, Cynthia’s interactions with her students—in this case, the caliber of their work—informed her impression of herself as a teacher. The implication here appears to be that, when students failed, Cynthia felt that reflected her inadequacies. For both Jennifer and Cynthia, students’ experiences influenced their sense of self. Kelly, too, felt the lack of student visibility and its influence on her relationship with students: “What's been challenging is not being able to gauge online how the students are responding. Like, are they enjoying the class? Are they not enjoying the class?” (Kelly, May 3, p. 7). This general uncertainty led to her feeling less confident, adding, “if a student compliments me, I'm like: really?” (Kelly, May 3, p. 7). In this reflection, Kelly got at

how the unknowability of students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic manifested for her and her peers in perceived lack of self-efficacy and self-confidence.

For teachers, striving for perfectionism can increase rates of stress and burnout (Flett et al., 1995; Stoeber & Rennert, 2007) and can lead to teachers detaching psychologically from their work which may increase their risk for experiencing depressive symptoms (Gluschkoff et al., 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, individuals with existing perfectionism were vulnerable to greater burnout and trauma (Flett & Hewitt, 2020). Considering the levels of psychological and emotional discomfort described by these teachers, there was something to be said about their capacity to share these feelings with one another. Through sharing their vulnerabilities around perfectionism, and the lessons which they took from those experiences, the teachers in this study demonstrated the intimacy of the group. As Palmer (1998/2017) wrote: “An intimate relationship goes beyond any implicit capacity for connectedness: in intimacy, we explicitly share our deeper natures with each other, in the belief that we can be fully known” (pp. 92–93). An intimate connectedness among the participants developed when some teachers were willing to enter into the bravery of vulnerability (Brown, 2015). When those teachers described their experiences with perfectionism, they also created a measure of emotional resistance to the prevailing backdrop of isolation, frustration, and disconnection that was inimical to the pandemic teaching context (Forgasz & Clemans, 2014; hooks, 2001; Jaggar, 1989). By sharing their fears and reflecting on their experiences, these teachers appeared to have cultivated meaningful connections together.

The findings in this chapter describe the complex experiences of teachers in pursuit of meaningful connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I discussed how the participants faced a pernicious and multi-faceted wall of disconnection which consisted of

several subthemes: the physical and practical limitations of the setting; the demoralizing experience of disconnection from students; a perceived dichotomy between attending to the curriculum and connecting with students; the realities of a hyperconnected classroom and school environment; and alienation from their administration during the pandemic. I also narrated the ways that some teachers pursued and made connections, finding further subthemes, including: teachers' conceptions of connection; the role of identity in connecting with students; reflections on historical models of connection; and practical approaches to connecting with students in the virtual and hybrid learning environment. Finally, I shared how some teachers in this study found community and connection as a group, with two major themes: cultivating resilience through social support and embracing vulnerability; and teachers learning from one another. In the next chapter, I discuss the conclusions I drew from these findings as well as the implications for teachers and teacher education programs. I also explain the implications of these findings for future research as well as the limitations of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this study, I set out to understand more about teachers' experiences of connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. My work was guided by a primary research question: How do teachers experience human connection during a pandemic? Three sub-questions included: What kinds of connection do teachers experience with students, peers, and administrators in this context? What practices do teachers employ in pursuit of connection with students, peers, and administrators in this context? What meanings do teachers make from these experiences?

Having described my thematic findings in Chapter 4, I want to begin the discussion of that work by returning briefly to my methodological approach to data analysis. In the data analysis process, I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in order to understand the experiences of the participants in this study. To this end, I begin this chapter by completing the hermeneutic circle, which is in keeping with the Heideggerian approach to phenomenology and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Heidegger, unlike, his philosophical counterpart Edmund Husserl, questioned the function of bracketing in phenomenology because, in his view, "we are always in the world with others in the circumstances of existence" (Peoples, 2021, p. 32), and it would therefore be impractical to think that someone could address all of their biases through bracketing. Heidegger, however, recognized that fore-conception or preconception was not something which could be avoided, but rather something which could support the interpretative process. For example, when one first encounters a novel, they may not know which aspects of their preconception are relevant to their interpretation; however, after reading the novel, one can look back and see what their preconceptions were (Smith et al., 2022). This way of looking back informed Heidegger's hermeneutic approach which sought to understand relationships between the parts and the whole,

which, for IPA research, led to the so-called double hermeneutic where “the ‘whole’ is the researcher’s ongoing biography, and the ‘part’ is the encounter with a new participant” (Smith et al., p. 29). Therefore, completing the hermeneutic circle allowed me to address the ways my own positionality and biography were at work in the interpretative process. This double hermeneutic, where I make sense of my own experiences as I attempted to make sense of the participants’ experiences, then, provides the reader with a clearer view of my biases during this project. This, in turn, adds integrity to the data, trustworthiness to the findings, and situates my conclusions in my own experiences.

To accomplish this, in the next subsection, I address my preconceived knowledge about connection (fore-sight/fore-conception) before moving into an exploration of my experiences of being there (dasein) during the study, from which point I demonstrate the ways that my understanding of connection changed as I analyzed the data (Smith et al., 2022). With the hermeneutic circle thus closed, I move on to summarize the findings from chapter four and discuss the extent to which the data answered my research questions. Then, I describe the conclusions I drew from analyzing the themes in the data. Following that, I discuss the implications of these findings and propose a pedagogy of human connection as a way for teachers, administrators, and researchers to inspire change in classrooms, school, and communities.

Completing the Hermeneutic Circle

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a research methodology that attempts to understand the essential experiences of participants (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Throughout this study, particularly during data analysis, I attempted to bracket my experiences and pre-existing ideas around themes and topics which I expected to arise in the findings and as

they arose during data analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The aim of doing this, to the extent possible, was to free my mind of preconceptions and allow me to enter into the participants' experiences more openly. However, interpretative phenomenological analysis in the hermeneutic tradition follows Heidegger's recognition that one can never fully empty themselves of preconception (Smith et al., 2022). In light of this, it is important for me as researcher to then complete the hermeneutic circle. To do this, in the section below, I provide an example of how my fore-sight or fore-conception led to my *dasein* (or, sense of being there) in order to demonstrate how this process changed my understanding. Just as Heidegger recognized it would be impractical to bracket all of one's biases, I posit that it would be impractical to address my entire experience moving through data in order to complete the hermeneutic circle. Instead, I present an illustrative example of how my fore-conception influenced my *dasein* which led to new understandings as a representative experience. I also address more generally the ways that my thinking had changed during the data analysis process.

Fore-Sight/Fore-Conception, Dasein, and the Hermeneutic Circle

Prior to analyzing the data for this study, I felt that human connection was a physical, metaphysical, and emotional phenomenon. I conceived of connection as being simultaneously tactile and nearly spiritual; ephemeral but vital to the human experience. In my bracketing, I wrote:

Walt Whitman said, "I am not contained between my hat and my boots," which is a wonderful metaphor for the supreme and spiritual largeness of our existence, but in a tangible way Old Uncle Walt moved through the world in between his skull and his toes. But what about Uncle Walt's embrace, his kiss, his infamous body? What happens when the human body touches another? Connection. And not only the physical, but the

communicative and emotional. Studies of mirror neurons show that when I smile, your brain smiles; when I wave, your brain waves. We may not manipulate one another like minarets, but through that neurological connection, we can influence one another. That is a powerful form of connection that is physically disconnected (if physically reflected in our biological similarities). (Daily Brackets, Entry 2)

At the outset of the study, I was hopeful and nearly poetic in my thinking about connection. In my researcher journal, just after our group's first meeting, I wrote: "Today was the first meeting of this inquiry group and it felt like it went really well. There was a lot of laughter and honest talk about this experience . . . I had one participant (BB) text me after to say it was 'fun and liberating'" (Researcher Journal, January 25). This early example provides a concrete instance of my fore-conception, reflecting my optimism for the project and my initial ideas about connection. However, as the project continued, my experiences and my thinking soon changed.

As they had volunteered for a study of human connection, I expected that the other participants shared similar visions for connection during the pandemic. I believed that our conversations would border on the ecstatic and metaphysical. Instead, the conversations began to move beyond what I had hoped. In another bracketing entry I reflected:

Reading this week's conversation, I felt emotionally stirred in ways I haven't thus far. Whereas prior transcripts tended to reveal more positive emotions in me, this conversation felt far more negative and combative. Teachers were clearly expressing negative emotions, too, but it was focused on students and teachers' attitudes towards them and grading and related policies. It felt as if this was a venting session, that we talked almost solely about disconnection without actually mentioning it at all. (Daily Brackets, Entry 5)

Here, the *dasein* or experience of being there, I saw some of the participants' experiences of student cheating and disconnection as mere griping, and remarked upon this day's conversation as "a venting session," implying that the conversation had little phenomenological value. Some judgment of my peers is implied here, too, along with my feelings of frustration and inadequacy with the way that the data collection was going. In an excerpt from my researcher journal after the meeting mentioned above, I wrote:

I worry that these meetings are straying further and further from the stated goal of discussing connection. I find myself making intellectual leaps to justify how every turn in the conversation can be steered back to connection, but I suppose I need to just let it go.
(Researcher Journal, March 22)

In another entry a few days later, I lamented my efficacy as a teacher, asking of my students: "Am I doing too much to not keep them accountable? Am I coming up with assignments that are too frequent? Too teacher-centered? Too far removed from their interests?" (Researcher Journal, March 25). At this time, both as teacher and as researcher, I was feeling overwhelmed and uncertain in my roles.

As data collection continued, we delved more deeply into our depictions of connection. Still, when some participants described approaches to connection that were dissimilar to mine, I felt conflicted, writing:

some connection appears to be conscientious: Ts do things such [as] 'put their guard down' or invite conversations or share pieces of their own stories/histories. Others in a similar vein do things like hold students accountable and push them to their best. While I feel a personal sense of conflict in the latter approach as it does not jive with my personal interpretation of conscientious connection-making (I am more of the conversational,

offering/helping/supporting/nurturing—although, this does have me wondering about the extent to which these are different things at all (that is, my ideas v. accountability)), I also noticed a kind of conflict in the process of attempting to connect. (Daily Brackets, Entry 7)

Again, the sense of being-there illustrated my fore-conception: I felt conflicted over how the participants approached connection because it did not align with my personal approach. It is clear, in the initial entry in this section, that I conceived of connection in a way that was specific to my philosophies. I expected connection to be marked by experiences that were emotional and relational; I assumed more participants' connective approaches would reflect my own. In the moment of being there, I felt frustrated that more participants did not see connection as I did (and, conversely, that I did not see connection as they did). However, looking closely at the language in the bracketing entry, I can see that I was beginning to see differently: "This does have me wondering about the extent to which these are different things at all (that is, my ideas v. accountability)" (Daily Brackets, Entry 7). This indicates the initial changes to my understanding of connection.

By the end of this study, not only did I no longer believe that my approach to connection was the ideal or the only valid way, I came to understand the phenomenon of connection in vastly more complex ways. For example, I saw that many teachers connected through care, and care takes on multiple forms including accountability and holding high standards (Delpit, 2012; Noddings, 1984/2013). Connection, I came to see, is practical, emotional, relational, and political. Through the iterative process of moving from part to whole, I recognized participants' emotions as evocative and vital experiences, and came to see "venting" as something far from simplistic but as an instance of what I will describe later as an emotional affinity space.

The above example is a concentrated effort at describing my experience as researcher and participant in this IPA dissertation. It is intended to function as synecdoche for the numerous ways—both internal and external, conscious and subconscious—that the process of analyzing the data included my preconceptions, experiences in the world with my peers, and my capacity for reflection and creating new understandings. I cannot recollect every aspect of this largely intuitive process, particularly in light of the vast amounts of data generated by the nine participants. To do so would potentially take away from the power of phenomenological work, which is an attempt to understand the essential experiences of the participants. Nor can I entirely neglect that I was present in this study, and that my experiences influenced both the data revealed and the findings. I can only recognize these realities included my own tensions with the conceptual understandings of my peers as well as biases towards a theoretical orientation of emotional knowledge. I hope to have demonstrated, in the example above, that the findings are true to my experiences and reflect my pursuit of understanding as an evolving, emergent process. In the section that follows, I continue to complete the hermeneutic circle by describing in greater detail my new understandings, which inform the findings and implications to follow.

Completing the Circle: New Understandings

Through the process of completing this study, my understanding of teachers' experiences of connection developed in several ways. In my early bracketing, I initially struggled to articulate my understanding of connection as a philosophical and practical construct, despite feeling intuitively that I understood connection. Through the data analysis process, the complexities of connection became clearer to me conceptually and pragmatically. I now understand connection as a complex phenomenon that can be articulated and experienced in practical ways while being rooted in the philosophical and ethical perspectives of individual teachers. While I initially

expected that connections would look similar across classrooms, I underestimated the extent to which experiences of connection were related to an individual teacher's unique identity. Even where I found thematic overlaps in pursuits and practices of connection, the phenomenon proved to be richer and more complex than expected.

Additionally, after initially completing the data collection, I recalled the ways participants believed their content area limited their capacities to connection. Specifically, I remembered some of the math and science teachers lamenting how their subjects did not naturally lend themselves to conversations around culturally relevant or humanizing topics. I also recalled these same teachers feeling as if the limited instructional time required them to stick to the content, otherwise they would have to “sacrifice” time to connect more personally beyond the subject matter. My initial response to this was disbelief: during a pandemic, I felt connection was a vital priority in the classroom, and I was surprised (and somewhat dismayed) that participants felt compelled to stick with their materials rather than make human connections during a difficult time.

However, through the data analysis process, I came to see that some teachers' sense of sacrifice and commitment to the curriculum reflected a confluence of ideals in action. On the one hand, during the pandemic, it was hard to deny that decades of educational reform movements emphasizing students' performance on standardized tests may have influenced some teachers' feeling a restricted capacity for connectivity on a personal level. When these teachers were worried about not meeting indicators on the state exam—which would eventually be cancelled—it was hard to deny the impact of such efforts. Simultaneously, I could not deny that this sense of sacrifice also reflected participants' beliefs about their subject and their conceptualizations of care in the classroom. For a teacher like Caroline, who pursued connection through her teaching

capacities, taking time to talk about a students' family was very clearly a form of sacrifice, as those conversations took time away from her efforts at connecting through content, which for her looked like effectively teaching the student. Again, these perspectives transformed my understanding of connection in classrooms as being nuanced in ways I was unable to perceive prior to this study. This understanding helped reframe my perspective on these teachers' range of approaches to connection, expanding it to include individual ethics and philosophy as well as the larger backdrop of standardized educational reform efforts. In this way, I began to see the participants approaches to and experiences of connection as socially constructed in the same ways that teachers' identity and emotions may be socially constructed (Fried et al., 2015; Zembylas, 2003).

Zembylas (2003) adopted a poststructural perspective to challenge popular conceptions of teacher identity as fixed or singular by recognizing that assumptions of a unified or continuous teacher identity were "not analytic features, but rather socially constructed and maintained norms" (p. 224). Similarly, my initial understanding of how teachers pursued connections was somewhat fixed and, ironically, rooted in my emotion-as-epistemology core belief that connection was only an emotional-relational construct. Through the data analysis process, I was able to recognize that these teachers' approaches to connection—particularly those who located relationality in content area—were shaped by prevailing socially-constructed norms. Zembylas's (2003) rejection of a singular or fixed teacher identity helped me understand that, while some teachers' conceptions and pursuits of connection may have been influenced by a standards-based curriculum, they were also arrived at through complex negotiations with power, identity, and emotion. This was supported in the data when participants described their experiences with connection in complex ways.

Finally, my understanding of participants' emotional realities during this study changed to be more optimistic. At the outset of this study, nearly a year into the COVID-19 pandemic and the attending political and personal turmoil, life was bleak. I brought my sense of despair to many of our group meetings and unfairly suspected my peers were in an equally dismal state of mental health. However, as I reviewed the recorded videos and re-reread the transcripts, I recognized that a sense of resilience was on display throughout. Although there were many moments of anger, frustration, despair, and resentment, these emotions were at times both evocative and connective; negativity or positivity were beside the point. What mattered was that we were able to be open with each other, and laying bare our emotions allowed us to connect in resonant ways (Yoo & Carter, 2017). The embrace of vulnerability supported our sense of community (Brown, 2012; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1997/2017). Whether it was participants laughing at the absurdity of parental hyperconnection, earnestly attempting to inspire one another, or simply seeking ways to help each other through the ordeal, the participants in this study proved to be indomitable. In spite of sensationalized stories about teachers leaving the profession in droves (Barnum, 2022), every teacher in this study was back at Gateway the following year. Given my own disposition at the time, I would have guessed that all of us would be seeking a new career after teaching through COVID-19. In this way, my greatest new understanding was the value in having a relational group of peers to reframe my experiences in broader, more nuanced and less selfish ways.

These new understandings reflected changes in my individual, emotional, and intellectual ways of seeing the world. The process of data analysis helped me situate my own experiences in pursuit of connection during the pandemic and provided a means for making larger conclusions among the data. Through completing the double hermeneutic, I was able to address the tensions

and biases in my approach and to connect those experiences with my thematic findings. In the section that follows, I summarize the findings from this study and then describe my conclusions, which include the assertion that connection and disconnection are interdependent phenomena and that experiences of disconnection threatened some teachers' sense of self.

Summary of Findings

This study found that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants experienced connection as a complex, emotionally-laden phenomenon alongside equally complex emotional experiences of disconnection. In this study, the participants' experiences of connection were influenced by the practical limitations of the virtual and hybrid classroom, which presented obstacles to connection. Obstacles to connection included: coping with the physical separation from students; contending with the frustration of “invisible” students who did not turn on their cameras or participate in virtual classes; and fearing the “hyperconnected” classroom where parental intrusions threatened some teachers' confidence. Additionally, some teachers recognized that the historical challenge of relating to students (and vice versa) was difficult under ordinary circumstances. This phenomenon was what participant Roy described as “a wall between teachers and students,” and the overall aim of the teachers in this study was to overcome that boundary and connect with students on a relational, human level.

Participants pursued connections for multiple purposes. For some teachers, connection was the goal: relating with students in a personal manner was valuable in and of itself. For other teachers, relational connecting was a strategic move undertaken with the aim of getting students to engage with the course materials in meaningful ways. Still, for many teachers in this study, the pursuit of connection was intended to suit both the aim of connection-for-connection's sake and to support student learning. As such, these teachers' experiences connecting with students may

be conceived of as existing along a continuum of professional to semi-professional connections. Professional connections were those pursued with the primary understanding that teachers who were relatable to students would, in turn, support students' connection to the course material. These connections were cultivated by building camaraderie and seeing the teacher as more fully human (e.g., Jennifer's desire to "be their friend, gain their trust") and by a teacher's commitment to supporting student learning (e.g., Caroline's academic-relational approach). Semi-professional connections were seen when teachers like Ryan invited the virtual classroom into his backyard where he was cooking bacon over a fire, or when Roy held a chess tournament in his virtual music classroom. These kinds of connections went beyond the state-mandated curriculum to relate with students as humans in the world together.

Following such a continuum, the teachers generally adopted a range of common practices to connect with students during the pandemic. The most common included practices of familiarity, novelty, and talking. Practices of familiarity were undertaken to provide students with a semblance of historical continuity in the pandemic context. These practices included rote note-taking sessions and daily journaling, teaching methods which were used pre-pandemic and which functioned to bridge assumed gaps between the virtual, pandemic classroom by using familiar examples of in-person learning. Meanwhile, novel teaching practices reflected the challenges and unique context of the virtual classroom. These practices ranged from a purposeful and informal use of the virtual classroom's chat function to engaging students in games, meditation sessions, and non-academic conversations. Some of these non-academic conversations reflected the common practice of "just talking," which multiple participants described as being a fruitful means of human connection. Just talking meant teachers taking time

to have conversations with students about a range of topics—typically unrelated to course content—in an attempt to understand each other better.

As for the way these teachers experienced connection with administrators, their descriptions were primarily characterized as disconnections. Several teachers described feeling abandoned by their leaders in the hyperconnected context of virtual learning. When parents complained of or questioned practices and policies, many teachers were told to hold their responses and refer parents to their school leaders. This, in turn, left those teachers feeling as if administrators valued parents' experiences and needs more than their own. Other teachers also described feeling confusion over pandemic-specific policies which did not reflect their voices or concerns, thereby leaving the teachers feeling silenced and invisible. Unsurprisingly, this led to some teachers feeling a sense of indignation which led to acts of subversion in the name of teacher autonomy and reclaiming their voices.

In terms of connection with peers, several teachers expressed finding community through participation in this study. They connected via their collective capacity for vulnerability, creating a space of authentic connections. The teachers in this study described how our meetings allowed them to reflect on their own practices, and they described learning practical approaches to connection from one another. Some teachers also found value in sharing their individual struggles to connect with students in this context. Additionally, most teachers' pursuits of connection during the pandemic were inspired by their historical experiences with connection prior to COVID-19 and included references to their previous efforts at connection and their experiences as students.

An analysis of these themes led me to conclude that (1) connection and disconnection are interdependent phenomena in the pandemic classroom; and (2) experiences of disconnection

during COVID-19 threatened teachers' sense of self. Later in the chapter, I expand on the implications of these conclusions by proposing a pedagogy of human connection.

Conclusions

The findings from this study have led me to two conclusions about the teachers' experiences of connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, while experienced in distinct ways, connection and disconnection were shown to be interdependent emotional phenomena, leading me to characterize the overall experiences of teachers in this study as experiences of dis/connection. Second, the teachers' experiences of dis/connection in this study threatened their sense of self, as teacher identity is often rooted in emotional epistemologies and experiences. In the section that follows, I elaborate on these conclusions in greater detail.

Dis/Connection Is an Interdependent Emotional Phenomenon

The participants' experiences of connection and disconnection during the COVID-19 pandemic led me to conclude that connection and disconnection are interdependent emotional phenomena. The distinction between an experience of connection or disconnection in this study was determined by the extent to which one's expectations for connection were met in a given circumstance. Participants' experiences of connection and disconnection were both emotional, and whether an experience was perceived or described as connection or disconnection reflected the extent to which teachers felt mutual recognition or reciprocation of the connective effort. For these teachers during the pandemic, connectivity was the expected goal of the classroom (whether virtual or physical) and disconnections were felt when the teachers' connective action or ideal was not recognized or reciprocated. Importantly, whether deemed to be connection or disconnection both were experienced emotionally. In this way, disconnection, rather than being separate from connection, can be seen as a rupture in the connective intentions inherent to the

emotional work of teaching. Using existing literature around teachers' emotions and the ethic of care (Noddings, 1984), in this section I describe how connection and disconnection were interdependent emotional experiences during the pandemic.

As demonstrated throughout chapter four, connections and disconnections were emotional experiences for the teachers in this study. While several of those instances of connection were associated with positive emotions, with the inverse often true for disconnection, importantly, the two experiences were inherently emotional. Rather than pursue a binary line of reasoning framing connections and disconnections as opposing experiences, I use the non-binary, interdependent nature of emotions (Jaggar, 1999; Nias, 1996) to illustrate the phenomenon of dis/connection for these teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching is an emotional endeavor, and teachers' emotions influence their practice and identity, which was recognized before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hargreaves, 1989; Jones & Kessler, 2020). From a poststructuralist perspective, teachers' emotional experiences and expressions are socially constructed in relation to students and classrooms and include references to teachers' historical, and personal value systems (Zembylas, 2003). While emotions have been categorized as positive or negative by researchers, a poststructural framework reveals emotions as a socially constructed process of knowing in action (Forgasz & Clemans, 2014; hooks, 1999; Zembylas, 2003). Teacher emotion, as actionable and identity-oriented, has been "depicted as intrapersonal and interpersonal" (Fried et al., 2015, p. 5), indicating that emotionality is not an individual either/or experience of positivity or negativity but is an interdependent, complex phenomenon. For example, in order to fully understand love, one necessarily has to understand its related emotions. I purposely selected love to illustrate this point, as hooks (1999) reminded us that love is complex, actionable, and lives within justice. In

that same vein of complexity, I posit that connection and disconnection were not binary experiences in this study, but interdependent emotional phenomenon that created a singular dis/connective experience.

Dis/connection, as an emotional construct, reflects the logic of Nel Noddings's care ethic. According to Noddings (1984/2013), a care ethic describes the relational interaction of care as requiring both the "one-caring" and the "cared-for." These roles are mutual and interdependent: the one-caring requires the cared-for to accept their efforts; similarly, it is not possible to be cared-for without accepting the efforts of the one-caring. This kind of interdependence reflects a similarly relational understanding of teachers dis/connective experiences during this study.

Following Noddings's (1984/2013) model, connections in this study can be said to have been attempted by the one-connecting (e.g., the teacher) in pursuit of relating with the connected-towards (e.g., the student). In order for connection to be made, the connected-towards (student) needed to reciprocate the effort of the one-connecting (teacher) in some recognizable way. Here is an illustrative example from the data: Roy (the one-connecting) described experiencing connection while "just talking" with his students. In this instance, his expectations for connection were felt to have been reciprocated by the students (the connected-towards) who joined him in conversation. In contrast, Caroline described experiencing disconnection when students did not use their cameras in class. Here, Caroline (as the one-connecting) held the connective expectation that students would keep their cameras on during class, and when that expectation was not reciprocated by the students (as the connected-towards) it became a disconnective experience for Caroline. In both instances, connection and disconnection were emotional experiences. Whether they were perceived as connections or not was predicated on the

extent to which the connected-towards were perceived as reciprocating the efforts of the one-connecting.

Furthermore, the two examples above illustrate the relational nature of connection as the baseline for the dis/connective experiences in this study: all participants approached their classroom with some level of expectation that connection was necessary. As such, when that expectation was not generally reciprocated, experiences of disconnection resulted. Therefore, connection and disconnection were interdependent phenomena where connection was the primarily expected experience and disconnection may have been more accurately understood as a disruption in the anticipation or expectation of connection. Again, as emotional constructs, they may have been experienced in distinctive ways and via a range of different emotions but, phenomenologically speaking, connection and disconnection could not be separated. Understanding dis/connection as interdependent phenomena can help better situate the teachers' experiences with parents and administrators during the pandemic.

Teachers have endured “intrusions” into their classrooms by parents, state-led reform efforts, and peers for decades, resulting in teachers feeling “anxious, impatient, distress, depressed, and angry” (Nias, 1996, para. 26). These same emotions were experienced by teachers in this study when they encountered intrusions from administrators and parents during the pandemic. As a relational construct, dis/connection may lead to these kinds of emotions when the expectations for connections were not met in larger ways. For example, based on the findings in Chapter 4, several teachers looked to administrators to respect their autonomy and support their efforts in the classroom. In this version of the dis/connective relational construct, those teachers appeared as the connected-towards, expecting that their leaders would be the one-connected. When their leaders did not meet those teachers' expectations for connection—in this case,

providing protection and autonomy—they experienced disconnection as well as anxiety, impatience, and distress.

The conceptualization of dis/connection becomes more nuanced in light of intrusions from hyperconnected parents during the pandemic. These intrusions were potentially novel to the circumstances of virtual teaching during the pandemic, and may have reflected the diminished social standing of teachers during the summer months of 2020 and the implicit frustrations of parents and policymakers at the time (Jones & Kessler, 2020). Still, during the pandemic, teachers and parents had a unique opportunity to understand each other as the one-connecting in the classroom and at home, both presumably working for the mutual care of their children/students. In the data, during the few instances when parents and teachers came together in this study, it reflected dis/connection. Roy described maintaining contact with parents and invited them into the virtual space when they could offer a new perspective or expertise. Meanwhile, Sophia's experience (described in Chapter 4) reflected a worst-case scenario of hyperconnection, and her capacity to care for her student was severely diminished. In these two instances, the interdependent emotional nature of dis/connection is on display: Roy and the participating parent were able to connect via mutual respect and care for each other and the students; Sophia's intrusive parent disrupted her capacity to care for the student. Although these were separate instances, they reflected the interdependent nature of dis/connection. Efforts of care towards students were either perpetuated (e.g., Roy's experiences) or disrupted (e.g., Sophia's experience) by hyperconnected parents in the virtual classroom.

Participants' experiences of connection and disconnection during this study were interdependent and emotional, leading me to conclude that dis/connection is a singular phenomenon. The linguistic construction of dis/connection is chosen purposefully: the slash

separates the experiences of disconnection and connection where each entail distinctive emotional resonances; the slash also mirrors the potential emotional violence in disconnection where the slash is both border and blade, reminding the reader that connection is always at risk of disconnection. In a world where isolation and loneliness are epidemic, dis/connection is a reminder that the aim is connection, but we must recognize that we cannot know connection without disconnection.

Moving forward, teachers may benefit from purposefully revisiting their conceptualizations of connection to develop a greater understanding of the interdependent nature of dis/connection. While the teachers in this study approached connection under unique circumstances, it was clear in the data that connections played a historical role in their work prior to the pandemic. Teachers today who consider the interdependent nature of dis/connection and allow it to inform their pursuit of connection in busy, dynamic classrooms may be better prepared to navigate the emotional realities of the construct. Where some teachers in this study experienced guilt, shame, and anger in response to disconnection, teachers beyond this study may recognize these feelings as integral to the connective pursuit. Knowledge of dis/connection may support resilience in response to disconnection, perhaps tempering expectations of connective practices. As an example, teachers in this study felt disconnected from students who did not use their cameras during synchronous virtual instruction. An understanding of dis/connection as an emotional interdependent phenomenon may help teachers validate their emotional responses of frustration and recognize disconnection as part of the dis/connection construct rather than an individual or cultural failure. The goal, then, is to use the interdependent nature of dis/connection in pursuit of a larger project of understanding ourselves in relation to one another so as to make meaningful connections with the world in which we live. In that spirit

of understanding the self, I turn to the next conclusion of this chapter: experiences of dis/connection threatened teachers' sense of self during the pandemic.

Experiences of Dis/Connection Threatened Teachers' Sense of Self

Although it remains a topic largely understudied, research on the role of emotions in teaching has grown in the last several decades (Fried et al., 2015; Zembylas, 2003). In a literature review of studies on teacher emotion from 2003 through 2013, Fried et al. (2015) used their findings to advance a conceptual model for understanding teachers' emotions in research, at the center of which was teachers' personal characteristics, or teacher identity. Teacher identity and emotion, importantly, are neither fixed nor static, but instead are dynamic, relational phenomena. Nias (1996) recognized the "emotional reactions of individual teachers to their work are intimately connected to the view that they have of themselves and others" (p. 294). Hargreaves (2001) presented the concept of "emotional geographies" (p. 1061) to articulate how feelings of closeness or distance orientate us emotionally to those with whom we seek to connect. Additionally, from a poststructural feminist position, Zembylas (2003) recognized that "emotions are social constructions occurring within a particular social and cultural context embedded in power relations" (pp. 217–218).

With these notions in mind, I arrived at the conclusion that some teachers' emotional experiences during the pandemic threatened their sense of self. Throughout this study, the teachers variably experienced shame, guilt, uncertainty, or frustration around their efforts to teach and connect with students. These teachers collectively questioned their methodologies as they were asked to continually adapt to changing teaching scenarios. Against the backdrop of isolation and alienation that persisted during this study, the emotional work of teaching for connectivity became a threat to some teachers' sense of self.

Teachers' sense of well-being and overall mental health suffered during the pandemic (Baker et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Kush et al., 2021; Poletti, 2020). Teachers also faced a specific kind of backlash in the summer leading up to the 2020–2021 school year, which left researchers Jones and Kessler (2020) asking at the start of that year, “Who will care about and for the teachers?” (p. 2). Throughout this study, many teachers' emotions ran high and were often evoked by external factors. These external factors ranged from the comparatively innocuous confusion around how to go about their work during a virtual snow day to the unnerving experience of a parent intruding on a classroom and questioning a teachers' knowledge and methodology.

Participants' sense of self was also threatened by the hyperconnected nature of the virtual learning environment during the pandemic. Although classroom intrusions are not new, they are still emotionally-laden experiences for teachers that can leave them feeling anxious or frustrated (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Nias, 1996). However, in the hyperconnected pandemic context, where teachers' work had been politicized and belittled (Jones & Kessler, 2020), that emotional reality was devastating to teachers' sense of self. Teaching is a caring, emotionally-encompassing job that is both vocation and avocation for many educators (Hargreaves, 1989; Nias, 1996). The mere possibility of parents lingering at the corners of virtual classrooms had teachers in this study on edge. I contend that such fear was not based on a lack of confidence but, instead, rooted in the emotional and political knowledge that teachers have very little agency or power in relation to parents. This has not always been the case. Power dynamics around schools have shifted as the school-choice movement gained staggering momentum under the Trump administration (Burris, 2022). Apple (2022) described the recent emergence of online schools and an increase in home-schooling in the wake of COVID-19 as evidence of neoliberal and

conservative ideologies undermining democracy. More locally, public sentiment towards teachers turned markedly against them in July 2020, when calls from business and government leaders urged teachers to return to schools so that the economy might regain its footing (Jones & Kessler, 2020). Taken together, there is a clear trend towards the erasure of teachers' identity in a polarized political setting that sees schools as components of a free-market system where the customer is always right.

Particularly during this study, it was implicit that some teachers' identities may have been erased when they were prevented by administrators from staking their professional agency when approached by parents. As stated by Zembylas (2003), "If teachers are denied recognition, this may cause them to internalize a demeaning image of themselves" (p. 223). Teacher agency supports the actualization of teacher identity: "The viability of teacher agency impacts teachers' capacity to engage their commitments and, therefore, feel that their identities are being realized" (Jones & Kessler, 2020, p. 5). When teachers were silenced during the pandemic, their sense of self became threatened as their agency was diminished and they were unable to complete their visions for education. According to Kelchtermans (1996), having one's integrity questioned in this way leads to vulnerability, which entails questioning one's professional identity.

In addition to agency, the inability to articulate preferred practices in their classrooms conflicted with some teachers' values and ethics. Palmer (1997/2017) recognized that teachers' practice is reflective of their identity, values, and integrity. Further, teachers may identify with their specific discipline's body of knowledge (Nias, 1996). As we saw with several teachers in this study, one's capacity to successfully teach the material of their subject was a point of connection. This is a values-driven experience, reflecting how those teachers knew and identified within the world. With limited practical options during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was no

surprise that some participants questioned their self-efficacy as they struggled to adapt practices in a frequently changing learning environment. The changing contexts and unclear policies led to vulnerability around adopting and adapting new methodologies, leading some teachers to feel disconnected from their historical sense of self as teachers.

The conclusion that some teachers' sense of self was threatened during this study aligns with research on teacher burnout during and after the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, Weibenfels et al. (2022) found that, for teachers experiencing burnout, feelings of depersonalization increased after the COVID-19 outbreak. Shimony et al. (2022) described that the most significant stressors for teachers experiencing burnout during COVID-19 were lack of support and struggles with the practical aspects of remote teaching. In a study of Canadian teachers, Sokal et al. (2021) found that teachers looked for leaders to give them a voice, acknowledge their efforts, and make attempts to gain their trust as means of support during the early stages of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. As these studies demonstrated, burnout undermined teacher's sense of self-efficacy. I contend that several teachers in this study demonstrated elements of burnout under the stresses of teaching during COVID-19, resulting in a diminished sense of self and overall well-being.

It is important to recognize that for those teachers whose sense of self was threatened or diminished, it was not however destroyed. Several teachers in this study found support in the group and in their collective emotional responses to the limitations of the context. Specifically, several teachers demonstrated resilience through their subversive language. When discussing their fears of parental intrusions and frustrations around administrative silencing, Cynthia and Roy said, "I don't care," and "Let them record me." In doing so, these teachers represented ways that participants used their feelings as "sites of resistance and self-transformation" (Zembylas,

2010, p. 214). Confronted with limitations to their practice and challenges to their values, these teachers resisted and transformed their sense of self in the new environment. Diminished though they felt, these teachers persevered.

In this study, I set out to understand teachers' experiences of connection during the pandemic. This work has led me to the conclusions that dis/connection is an interdependent emotional phenomenon, and that experiences of dis/connection threatened teachers' sense of self. In the next section, I move to the implications of this study with hope and in the spirit of resilience, as I advance a framework for a pedagogy of human connection that can support connections in classrooms, schools and communities.

Implications

As of this writing, the World Health Organization still lists COVID-19 as a pandemic and a global health emergency (World Health Organization, 2023). Meanwhile, in May, 2023, the Center for Disease Control in the US announced an end to the federal COVID-19 public health emergency, signifying a change in how the federal government handled data collection and indicating that, as a country, the US is “at a different point in the pandemic—with more tools and resources than ever before to better protect ourselves and our communities” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). The teachers in this study have returned to the so-called “new normal,” shorthand for life after the initial trauma of the pandemic. Life has gone forward for myself and the study's participants: I am near the conclusion of this doctoral work; Roy has since retired; Cynthia has left the Gateway school district; and Yessica is expecting a new baby shortly. I see Kelly, Sophia, Caroline, and Ryan regularly; Jennifer and Bruce and I had a habit of eating lunch together a few days per week during the year after the study concluded. The pandemic is, in some ways, a memory by now.

Partially because of the emotional distance between the time of this writing and the time of the initial data collection, I often wondered while composing these chapters: what have we learned today from those experiences during that first year of the pandemic? Maxine Greene (1988) wrote that tragedy “discloses and challenges; often it provides images of men and women on the verge. We may have reached a moment in our history when teaching and learning, if they are to happen meaningfully, must happen on the verge” (p. 23). In reviewing the data from this study, I saw an image of humans on the verge of burnout and despair, but also on their way to reclaiming their sense of self. And, although the tragedy may have abated somewhat, teaching and learning are still happening on the verge. The pandemic has had measurable effects on student learning, leading to concerns of learning loss particularly for students in high-minoritized or impoverished districts (Fahle et al., 2023). Teenage rates of depression, particularly among Black, female, and LGBTQ+ students are a continued cause for concern (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2023b). While the urgency of our response to the factors of the pandemic may have diminished, the effects of that time not only linger, they appear to have exacerbated several of our existing systemic issues.

For years, America’s isolationist culture has diminished quality of life and jeopardized the physical and mental health of people in this country (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Christakis, 2019; Lieberman 2013; Way et al., 2018). Even as the urgency of the pandemic waned in the US, in mid-2023 the US Surgeon General’s office released a public health advisory declaring an epidemic of isolation and loneliness in the US, directly acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic “crystallized and accelerated” (US Surgeon General, 2023, p. 45) the need to establish such national guidelines for addressing the crisis of connection. Like Way et al. (2018), I see the hand of market-driven policies and patriarchal beliefs driving our isolated, hyper-individualistic,

consumerist society. I also see the hand of these policies and cultural beliefs in teachers' experiences of dis/connection during the pandemic. Schools are perpetrators of the same isolating ideologies of our larger culture, as Giroux (1988) noted: "The structure of schooling reproduces the ethos of privatization and the moral posture of selfishness at almost every level of the formal and hidden curricula" (p. 37).

During the pandemic, schools had an opportunity to unchain themselves from the limitations of physical, egg-crate isolation of individual classrooms (Lortie, 1975). Furthermore, early in the pandemic, Diane Ravitch (2020) wrote a call-to-arms for educators to adopt a flux pedagogy, to seize the transition to emergency remote teaching and school closures as an opportunity to rethink schooling in more radical, compassionate, and humane ways. It was in this spirit that I chose to undertake a study of teachers' experiences with connection during the pandemic. What I have found in doing this work is that the need for humanization is just as great today as it was during the divisive, isolating time of the early pandemic. In some ways, now that the pandemic-specific restraints are lifted, we can take from that struggle a sense of urgency to remake the present and future. The lessons of the pandemic reminded us of the vital importance of human connections in classrooms, schools, and communities and their capacity to make a more just, humane world. The findings from this study—that dis/connection is an emotional interdependent phenomenon and that experiences of dis/connection during the pandemic threatened teachers' sense of self—frame the implications of this work. Namely, in the subsection that follows, I describe a pedagogy of human connection as a tool for cultivating deeper and more meaningful connections in schools and communities. A pedagogy of human connection is a framework for teachers, administrators, school community members,

policymakers, and education researchers to build on the connective capacities of schools in order to address the persistent issues arising from the crisis of connection.

Towards a Pedagogy of Human Connection

A pedagogy of human connection is informed by the work of poststructuralist feminist scholars who reject binary rational conceptualizations of knowledge in favor of relational, intersectional, and critical ways of knowing and being in the world (Collins & Bilge, 2016; hooks, 1994; St. Pierre, 2000). In order to disrupt the crisis of connection (Way et al., 2018) and eradicate the epidemic of isolation and loneliness (US Surgeon General, 2023), it is vital that teachers, school leaders, education researchers, and policy makers begin to understand and implement critical, humanizing pedagogies (Freire, 1970/2017). As such, a pedagogy of human connection attempts to build on prior efforts at humanizing pedagogies, including hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy; Arrastia's (2018) love pedagogy; Freire's (1970/2000) pedagogy of the oppressed; and Palmer's (1997/2017) community of truth. This work is deeply informed by notions of love (hooks, 1999; Lanas & Zembylas, 2014) and care (Noddings, 1984/2013, 2005) as well as research that recognizes and invites greater understanding of the complex role teachers' emotions play in classrooms and the lives of students and educators (Hargreaves, 1989, 2001; Nias, 1996; Zembylas, 2003, 2007).

Ultimately, as Love (2019) wrote: "Pedagogy, regardless of its name, is useless without teachers dedicated to challenging systemic oppression with intersectional social justice" (p. 19). To this end, a pedagogy of human connection draws from relational-cultural theory (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2017) to advance a critically- and culturally-oriented framework for pursuing human connection in two essential ways: cultivating mutual growth and cultivating authenticity. In this study, a review of the findings indicated that dis/connections occurred where reciprocal

expectations for connection were unmet. Therefore, in order to engage the reciprocity needed to forge connections, a pedagogy of human connection begins with understanding the notion of mutuality which leads to mutual growth. By engaging in processes for mutual growth, teachers can build their connective repertoires and create classrooms and emotional affinity spaces that are sites of mutual connectivity. To be successful in supporting human connections, these processes, in turn, rely upon the cultivation of authenticity. Cultivating authenticity supports human connection as it requires the bravery of vulnerability and asks teachers, students, and school leaders to engage in the historically connective act of storytelling. In the end, cultivating mutual growth and authenticity provide the two essential characteristics of a pedagogy of human connection.

Characteristics of a Pedagogy of Human Connection. In this study, despite the substantial wall of disconnection with which the participating teachers had to contend, the data revealed how many of their approaches to, and experiences with, connection were rooted in care and a desire to know and be known. These teachers pursued connections as pedagogical and relational strategy to ensure learning and to develop relationships during a time of physical and psychic isolation. Their efforts belied historical approaches to connections that helped them endure the pandemic and from these findings I believe we can frame a way forward to ensure connections are centered in schools and classrooms. In pursuit of this, I propose a pedagogy of human connection.

A pedagogy of human connection borrows from relational-cultural theory as a guide for understanding how to combine the aims of social justice work with relational and emotional nature of dis/connection. Rooted in the field of relational psychology, relational-cultural theory (RCT) “is a theory about our basic interconnectedness, about the inevitability of needing one

another throughout our lives” (Jordan, 2017, p. 231), with a focus on recognizing the ways that prevailing power structures influence our relationships. One of the core processes of RCT is the notion of “mutual empathy,” an aspect of relationship development where:

both people grow and both people contribute to the growth of each other and to the relationship . . . each person is inspired to shine, to change, to value his or her own well-being at the same time he or she shares in the growth of the other person and in the well-being of the relationship. (Jordan, 2017, p. 235)

Reflective of Noddings’s (1984/2013) conceptualizations of empathy as feeling-with, Jordan’s (2017) understanding of mutual empathy focused on the relational aim of mutual growth.

Additionally, Comstock et al. (2008) described seven core tenets of RCT built from feminist and social justice theories which elaborate on mutual empathy. Of these tenets, two reflect guiding principles of a pedagogy of human connection: moving towards mutuality and the necessity of authenticity for real engagement. Moving towards mutuality reflects Jordan’s (2017) notion that connected relationships require mutual growth and well-being; the moving-towards aspect indicates that this is something which grows over time through cultivating mutual empathy. The necessity of authenticity for real engagement means that the people involved in the relationship truly support the other’s well-being, without hope for their own benefit or power, but for the sheer enjoyment of seeing another human being have their needs met.

A pedagogy of human connection is predicated on the implications of this study’s findings around dis/connection, and the concepts of mutuality and authenticity are appropriate places from which to build this framework. Throughout the data on dis/connections, a kind of mutuality was present: when teachers felt connection, it was often because they felt their conception of connection was mutually reciprocated or recognized; conversely, disconnections

were experienced where there was no mutual reciprocity. In RCT, the notion of mutuality as a desire for mutual growth on the part of those in the relationship reflects an inherent aspect to teaching, which is the implicitly caring role undertaken by teachers (Noddings, 1984/2013). Teachers do not typically undertake their work to limit the growth of their pupils. However, studies have shown that the pandemic diminished teachers' sense of well-being (Kim et al., 2021), and the crisis of connection revealed that isolation runs through many aspects of our society (Way et al., 2018). Therefore, the concept of mutual growth is a fundamental aspect of a pedagogy of human connection, as it invokes purposefully the mutual growth that comes from fully connected relationships, particularly in school. To do this at this time in history where isolation is epidemic requires the kind of emotional bravery that comes from embracing vulnerability (Brown, 2015).

In order to cultivate mutual growth, there must also be the cultivation of authenticity. Authenticity is an act of vulnerability (Brown, 2015), one that asks people in a relationship to transcend the inherent or implicit power dynamics at work and attempt to truly be with and for the person or people with whom they hope to connect (Jordan, 2017). Authenticity also requires honesty about the goals and reasons for connection, which may implicate one's recognition of power in a relationship and therefore require that individuals relinquish power where it may prevent mutual growth or authentic engagement (Comstock et al., 2008). In this dissertation study, some teachers described experiences of disconnection from school leaders when confronted with the limitations of their own power during the pandemic. The emotional reaction to this, for several teachers, was frustration and resentment over top-down policy decisions and the corresponding lack of agency felt when prohibited from responding to parents during the pandemic. In these instances, while their individual emotional responses were genuine, the

power structures at play left them vulnerable to the whims of the more powerful. This also had the effect of preventing those teachers from connecting authentically with their students and administrators, leading to further feelings of isolation.

In the next section of this chapter, I outline practical approaches to the two essential tenets of a pedagogy of human connection. Before proceeding, I want to be clear that the goal here is to describe both the framework and any practices as initial offerings. I recognize the range of research-supported practices and theories upon which this work builds, and this contribution aims to corral what is relevant and purposeful to the pursuit of human connection as an effort to combat the epidemic of loneliness and isolation through mutual growth and authenticity. Further, while I have delineated between the two tenets as a means of organizing the framework, I want to highlight the fluidity of these concepts. For practitioners attempting to realize this framework, in some instances, it may be unclear which tenet should be enacted first. To that end, I suggest that teachers surrender to the uncertainty and vulnerability inherent to the process and simply begin where it feels right.

Cultivating Mutual Growth. Nel Noddings (1984/2013), in describing her care ethic, portrayed empathy as more than the capacity to logically project one's feelings onto others' circumstances. For Noddings (1984/2013), empathy was more accurately seen as "engrossment," as the act was less a matter of guessing how someone might feel in a situation and more an act of truly attempting to experience with the other: "I do not project; I receive the other unto myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality" (p. 30). Engrossment, then, entails reception not projection. This is a powerful distinction, not only because it is a rejection of patriarchal and rationalistic ways of knowing the world, but also because it requires deep care on the part of the empathizer. For Noddings (2005), care is a fundamental part of teaching and

learning. In a pedagogy of human connection, care is a form of mutual empathy which leads to mutual growth for the one-connecting and the connected-towards. To arrive at mutual growth, the one-connecting may begin by creating emotional affinity spaces (Gee, 2005; Zembylas, 2003).

“Emotional affinity space” is a term I have coined as a way of thinking about using teachers’ emotions in more concrete ways. The phrase brings together Zembylas’s (2003) “emotional affinities” (p. 233) and Gee’s (2005) “affinity space” (p. 214). Zembylas (2003) originally described emotional affinities, as “connections or bonding based on coalitions and friendships” (p. 233). Zembylas (2003) theorized that, through poststructural discourse, teachers might recognize how their identities and emotions are formed and transformed “within specific school political arrangements” (p. 226). Through such discourse, teachers can begin to “construct defense and support mechanisms to continuously re-construct and re-affirm their identities” (p. 228) which are often rooted in emotional experiences. Hence, teachers who bonded or connected over recognitions and explorations of the role of emotions in forming their identities would then establish emotional affinities, through which “teachers may come to discover empowering tools to know their teaching, themselves, and others” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 233).

Gee (2005) originally conceived of affinity spaces by exploring “semiotic social spaces” of learning and knowledge sharing in the 21st century. Gee’s (2005) affinity spaces were presented as an alternative to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice. In contrast to a community of practice, an affinity space is a more nebulous construct that focuses on interactions of individuals in common “spaces” (physical or digital) around a common idea, concern, or interest. Where a community of practice aims for mastery or expertise through apprenticing, affinity spaces are exploratory and attaining mastery is not always the goal

although “masters” may be present and interacting with novices (Gee, 2005). However, a key component of affinity spaces is the range of learning experiences and approaches to creating and maintaining these spaces. Everyone is welcome to join, and participants can learn as much or as little as they need; smaller groups are free to form around specific topics in order to build individual knowledge into distributed knowledge (Gee, 2005). Given that affinity spaces offer sites of connection around a topic of interest with little or no hierarchical organization and no expectation of mastery, as well as the potential for emotional affinities to allow teachers to explore connection for personal, social, and political aims, this concept yielded a framework for further developing Zembylas’s (2003) emotional affinities.

Emotional affinity spaces are teacher-centered spaces (virtual or physical) where teachers’ emotions are explored to more fully understand—or critique—the ways that power, identity, and emotion intersect to influence their experiences. On a practical level, emotional affinity spaces can be implemented through formal professional development as inquiry groups or professional learning communities (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Ideally, however, emotional affinity spaces combine nonformal and informal learning settings, where teachers intentionally pursue networks or study groups based off of conversations with colleagues or observations in their classrooms (Richter et al., 2013). As an example, in my conception of the construct, an emotional affinity space legitimizes the emotional connection inherent to what is often dismissed as teacher griping or complaining. Novice teachers are sometimes stereotypically told to avoid the teachers’ lounge, for fear that more jaded or unhappy veteran teachers will taint their happiness or optimism. However, under the lens of emotional knowledge and in pursuit of a pedagogy of human connection, I submit that some teachers’ griping can reveal important facets of a school’s political arrangement. An exploration of seemingly simple gripes can reveal the

ways that individual teacher's identity has been shaped and reshaped by the context in which they teach. The dismissal of teacher griping in the lounge reinforces the rationalistic, objective professional identity forced upon teachers. If teachers' emotions matter, then they matter wherever they surface. An emotional affinity space allows for deeper exploration of the emotional experiences with peers as a coalition. These coalitions should have some common organizational features.

At an organizational level, emotional affinity spaces would incorporate some aspects of Gee's (2005) primary features of affinity spaces. Gee (2005) depicted affinity spaces as nonhierarchical and open to willing participants with a range of experience levels. In an emotional affinity space, this means that leadership may be necessary to maintain group coherence, but leaders takes on various roles and "the boundary between leader and follower is vague and porous" (Gee, 2005, p. 228). In emotional affinity spaces, novice and expert alike can explore their emotional experiences without feeling as if one person's experience has more weight than the other; the aim is to understand power and identity rather than solve a practical problem. Similarly, affinity spaces valued individual and distributed knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge (Gee, 2005). So, too, can emotional affinity spaces. In an emotional affinity space, individual emotional knowledge is inherently nonhierarchical as it is rooted in experience. Sharing and exploring individual emotional experiences can lead to distributed knowledge about emotions and power so that "people know and do more than they could on their own" (Gee, 2005, p. 227). Similarly, when emotional affinity spaces honor tacit knowledge, they recognize and explore the emotional knowledge that teachers "have built up in practice but may not be able to explicate fully in words" (Gee, 2005, p. 227). Ultimately, an emotional affinity space should be organized around a common interest of exploring emotions to understand the relationship

between teachers' emotions, identity and power and all participants should be able take something from the space "based on their own choices, purposes and identities" (Gee, 2005, p. 225). The organization of these groups can range from formal professional development to informal coalitions of teachers seeking to understand the relationships between identity, emotions and power.

Within emotional affinity spaces, teachers may explore experiences of dis/connection, which can begin with reflecting on their emotional experiences with connection in the classroom. In analyzing the data for this dissertation, it became clear to me that teachers had a nascent understanding of their approaches to forging connections. Through our conversations during the study, we were able to articulate our conceptions of connection, and through this sharing I saw, to varying degrees, how our experiences of dis/connection were shaped by our histories, ideals, and the political context of the pandemic. Sharing our conceptions of connection helped us explore the "emotional ecology" of our classrooms, which Zembylas (2007) defined as "a teacher's (or learner's) emotional knowledge in a particular social and political context, including the rich connections to emotional experiences, and relationships with others (e.g., students, colleagues, parents) over time" (p. 357). During this study, sharing our experiences led to rich connections amongst the group. An emotional affinity space undertaking similar work can forge rich connections in the space by focusing on the individual and contextual influences of teachers' experiences with dis/connection. In doing so, teachers will also recognize the political implications of their emotional experiences which can support mutual professional growth.

Teachers in emotional affinity spaces who investigate their emotional knowledge are also discussing facets of their identity. As Zembylas (2003) noted, explorations of teachers' identity can be "profoundly revealing of the roles of school culture, norms and ideologies, and opens

possibilities for interrogating these roles and reformulating the visions about what teachers can become” (p. 230). In this study, several teachers described how school policies during COVID-19 led to experiences of dis/connection, but stopped just short of organizing or agitating for policy changes. Moving forward, teachers in emotional affinity spaces can uncover these influences on their connective practices and purposefully question the structures at work to join together to develop new visions for their practice and identities while also confronting the ideological boundaries they encounter. In the spirit of true mutual growth, this work can lead to teachers engaging as a coalition—formally or informally, with or without school leaders—to organize and remove institutionalized mechanisms of disconnection. During the pandemic, such a purposefully empowered political approach may have encouraged this study’s participants to reclaim some of their political and professional agency.

A pedagogy of human connection should also extend to teachers cultivating connections and mutual growth with the students in their classroom. As demonstrated in this study, forging connections with students is neither simple nor straightforward. Ellsworth (1989) recognized the paradox of relational teaching is the inherent “unknowability” of teachers and students as separate social groups, asking “What would it mean to recognize not only that a multiplicity of knowledges are present in the classroom . . . but that these knowledges are contradictory, partial, and irreducible?” (p. 321). Zembylas (2005) took up this paradox and advanced a pedagogy of unknowing, which is “a pedagogy of listening and attentiveness . . . that embraces otherness and unknowing” (p. 151). Similar to the way that dis/connection is an emotional interdependent phenomenon, a pedagogy of human connection embraces the paradox of unknowability and pursues connection “via negativa” or what Zembylas (2005) referred to as “a commitment to the *impossibility* of knowing” (p. 150, author’s italics). To cultivate mutual growth in classrooms,

therefore, teachers must first surrender to the ontological limitations of the classroom.

Richardson (2019) argued that educational contexts are liminal spaces, operating at contextual boundaries which provide room for “relational recognition” (p. 454), a process of deeper understanding which included recognizing the absence of what cannot or has not been known. Teachers who understand the paradoxical unknowability of students as they pursue connections are therefore prepared to explore the complexities of dis/connection in their classrooms. Still, encounters with unknowability may lead to uncertainty around what power looks like in the classroom. Dominating approaches to power assume the teacher knows the students and has power over what the students can know (Freire, 1970/2017). If such unchecked assumptions of power and knowability persist, this can limit the capacity for mutual growth. As such, unknowability brings the pursuit of mutual growth into the realm of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy is, at base, a mutual effort by teachers and students engaging with the world in ways that seek to recognize and challenge power structures in pursuit of liberation (Freire, 1970/2017). Critical pedagogy is political work that centers the lived experiences of those engaged, where knowledge is co-created rather than delivered or banked (Seal & Smith, 2021). These approaches are purposefully subversive to oppressive modes of teaching which attempt to deposit and withdraw knowledge from students. Critical pedagogies require teachers to be aware of their own power so they can use it towards liberatory ends. For example, the aims of anti-racist education are less concerned with the inclusion of racial topics in a classroom and more focused on building educator’s awareness of their social position and their capacity to address power imbalances while cultivating acceptance and compassion in the classroom (Kishimoto, 2018). In this spirit, cultivating mutual growth entails adopting critical approaches to develop awareness of power structures at work in classrooms. Teachers who recognize the

ways their identity supports or limits the growth of their students are better prepared to cultivate mutual growth. On a practical level, teachers can acknowledge and explore the power dynamics of classrooms and schools through the simple act of “just talking.” A prominent theme in the data from this study, “just talking” reflects Freire’s (1970/2017) co-intentional, dialogical approach to teaching that is simultaneously subversive and connective. It is subversive in the sense that taking time for “just talking” takes time away from the standardized curriculum in pursuit of humanization. Just talking, as shown in this study, can be more or less formal, with the latter potentially including the creation of emotional affinity spaces in the classroom. In its simplest form, just talking helps teachers have conversations that lead to implicit and explicit understandings of what growth looks like for students, which is vital to supporting them on their educational journey. As was shown in the findings of this study, accurately understanding students’ conceptions of growth and experiences connection is vital to avoiding the kinds of generalizations or assumptions about students’ experiences that can lead to disconnection.

Cultivating mutual growth—either through emotional affinity spaces or just talking in classroom—can build connections through the process of exploring emotional knowledge and experiences of dis/connection. The creation of emotional affinity spaces can allow teachers to create nonhierarchical spaces of mutual interest where teachers can grow together towards more connective and relational practices and identities. Teachers can then build upon this professional mutual growth to ensure their students’ needs are met through adopting critical perspectives and recognizing the limited and liminal nature of this work. Ultimately, a pedagogy of human connection rests on the cultivation of mutual growth, which I see as holding great potential for deepening relationships in schools and supporting greater political awareness in teachers and students. During a time when isolation has led to learning loss (Fahle et al., 2023), as well as the

diminished student and teacher well-being following COVID-19 school closures (Kim et al., 2021), cultivating mutual growth can be an antidote to loneliness and bring students and teachers together through connective spaces and practices. Furthermore, school administrators who enact a pedagogy of human connection through the cultivation of mutual empathy and growth can support their teachers to move beyond traditional, value-added growth models and begin to help teachers define growth in more holistic, emotional and transformative ways. In order for these efforts to be realized, however, teachers and administrators will also need to cultivate authenticity both with their peers and with their students.

Cultivating Authenticity. In relational-cultural theory, authenticity has been described as “ever-evolving, not achieved at any one moment—it is a person’s ongoing ability to represent herself in relationships more fully” (Miller et al., 1999, p. 5). This definition, established in pursuit of mutual engagement and fostering growth in relationships, also reflected Heidegger’s notion of the authentic self as a construction and reconstruction of a storied existence over time (Varga & Guignon, 2023). An evolving and storied authentic self was also recently explored in Brown’s (2015) work around shame. In studying experiences of shame, Brown (2015) found that authenticity reflected the capacity for being true to one’s experiences, which meant enduring shame and allowing room for vulnerability. For Brown (2015), folks who were able to acknowledge the complexities of shame and embrace vulnerability were living more authentically, as they were able to more fully articulate their sense of self than folks who hid from shame or vulnerability. Taken together, I conceived of authenticity as an individual’s capacity to recognize, embrace, and explore the tensions and contradictions of their storied identity as it changes with the aim of being fully present in their relationships. Authenticity reflects an acceptance of the self as evolving, imperfect, and malleable towards more relational

ends. For a pedagogy of human connection, the cultivation of authenticity means tapping into the genuine emotional and relational experiences of individuals in schools in order to support connections at a variety of levels.

The philosophical concept of authenticity has evolved over time, initially associated with notions of sincerity or autonomy before becoming connoted with the self, which led to critiques of authenticity as a form of self-centeredness or essentializing the complexities of identity (Varga & Guignon, 2023). Authenticity as a practical concern, as it is with cultural-relational theory and the work of Brown (2015), also recognized practical limitations. Miller et al. (1999) recognized that boundaries were necessary for relational therapists; Brown (2015) warned that vulnerability—a corollary of authenticity—can be emotionally manipulative if not used with care. Further, according to Jordan’s (2017) work in relational-cultural theory, one’s capacity for authenticity may be related to experiences of power or powerlessness, which she understood as a form vulnerability. As Jordan (2017) noted, authenticity is lost when dominant groups or individuals silence less powerful groups or individuals, rendering the less-powerful vulnerable to those in power, which necessarily limits individual capacities for relationships and collectively prevents social change. This has implications for attempts at cultivating authenticity in schools.

Kelchtermans (1996) found that teachers experienced vulnerability due to their lack of decision-making power at the policy and local school levels; teachers also experienced vulnerability when confronting the limits of their capacities to reach all students. This led Kelchtermans (1996) to conclude that: “Vulnerability is inherent in the teaching job and as such never completely avoidable” (para. 62). In some respects, Kelchtermans’s (1996) conclusion reflected the notion that as long as teachers feel powerless in their profession, they will also feel vulnerable. More recently, Brown (2015) described how the fear and shame typically associated

with vulnerability can keep people from living authentically. And yet, Brown (2015) also recognized that shame was related to prevailing notions of vulnerability as weakness. She found that people who embraced vulnerability were, in fact, living authentically and courageously: “Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it’s having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage” (Brown, 2015, p. 4). Nearly a decade before Brown’s (2015) findings, hooks (1994), concluded that vulnerability was a necessary component of an engaged classroom: “growth cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21). And so, in the spirit of Brown (2015) and hooks (1994), teachers adopting a pedagogy of human connection can cultivate authenticity by learning to embrace vulnerability. One way that teachers can do this is through storytelling.

In addition to his findings on power and vulnerability, Kelchtermans (1996) noted how the act of sharing their autobiographies helped his participating teachers to situate and understand their vulnerability in relation to larger moral, intellectual, and political contexts. Brown (2015) also recognized that humans are storytelling beings and explained how the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences can influence our capacity for bravery, vulnerability, and authenticity. Similarly, Noddings (1996) described the power of storytelling to help “induce feeling and help us to understand what we are feeling” (p. 435). Nias (1996) saw that teachers’ stories of their feelings, thoughts, and actions had organizational power, writing: “the making and telling of stories can become a productive starting point for collective action” (p. 305). Zembylas (2003) also acknowledged the relationship between teacher storytelling and vulnerability: “the goal, however, is not self-preservation in any sense, but the willingness to be vulnerable in empathizing with others and to exercise openness and flexibility in acting to

transform these emotions, acts, practices and thoughts” (p. 230). Gathered together under the light of connection, these studies appear to suggest that teachers looking to enact a pedagogy of human connection would do well to find time to share their narratives of connection and disconnection, perhaps in emotional affinity spaces. Similar to the notion that teachers who reflect upon their practice together in emotional affinity spaces may cultivate mutual growth, teachers who share stories of dis/connection can cultivate authenticity. In that same way, as with mutual growth, sharing stories may also provide teachers with a reference point for the larger political narratives influencing their experiences, which may lead to pursuits of change (Kelchtermans, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). Given the power of narrative to evoke emotions (Noddings, 1996), I would argue that storytelling is an essential act of any connective effort in classrooms, schools and beyond.

Whether undertaken as part of emotional affinity work (Zembylas, 2003) or as a point of connection with students, storytelling can be a powerful practice. However, as teachers consider sharing narratives with students, I am reminded of the words of hooks (1994):

Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classroom, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. (p. 21)

Teachers who embrace vulnerability in themselves may be living bravely (Brown, 2015), but there should be some caution against inviting students to share before having cultivated a classroom of mutual growth and respect. While it may be true that vulnerability leads to mutual empathy, teachers must use their professional judgment in undertaking this powerful practice.

In addition to the studies described above, the power of narrative and life history in educational research has been well-documented (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Coia & Taylor, 2014; Norton, 2012). A pedagogy of human connection attempts to add to this body of practical and theoretical knowledge by situating storytelling as a practice of human connection. Teachers' stories of dis/connection can be a point of mutual empathy with peers and can help them locate the political dimensions influencing their work; it can also support emotional affinity spaces that lead to greater connectivity among peers. In classrooms, teachers sharing stories with students helps acknowledge their mutual vulnerabilities and may be a point of connection. Students sharing stories with the class may help connect students to each other, supporting the efforts of cultivating mutual empathy and growth. Importantly, there should also be space for teachers and administrators to engage in autobiographical sharing for the purposes of human connection. The data in this study revealed ways that some teachers felt isolated from their administrators and their attending policies but felt connected through just talking. Talking, sharing stories of self, and exploring experiences of disconnection with the goal of mutual empathy and empowerment may have had a transformative effect for these teachers during the pandemic. I believe that, moving forward, the more teachers and administrators can see each other as individuals whose mutual growth is connected, the more they can help make schools and their attending communities more connected. In the end, stories help us to know and be known (Palmer, 1983).

Love (2019) wrote: "No type of pedagogy, however effective, can single-handedly remove the barriers of racism, discrimination, homophobia, segregation, Islamophobia, homelessness, access to college, and concentrated poverty" (p. 19). Love (2019) went on to posit that, in spite of this, pedagogy combined with community and grassroots organization can push

for social change. A pedagogy of human connection grounded in the aims of cultivating mutual growth and authenticity provide opportunities for social change through pursuits of connection. As Love (2019) also recognized, pedagogy has real power when it leaves the school and enters the community and political realms. As a pedagogy of human connection, this framework has clear implications for schools and classrooms. What remains to be seen is how a pedagogy of human connection can support connections with schools and communities and grassroots organizations. While there has been work around the relationship between schools and communities (Moll et al., 2005), a pedagogy of human connection is, at this time, primarily applicable to schools and classrooms. My hope is that this framework can extend to communities and grassroots organizations, and I suggest that more research is needed to understand how this framework might support efforts of community and grassroots organizing. Additionally, given the experiences of dis/connection during this study, I also recommend future researchers seek to understand parent-teacher relationships in light of this framework. I elaborate on the implications of a pedagogy of human connection for teacher educators, policy makers, and administrators.

Implications for Teacher Educators, Policy Makers, and Administrators. Teachers who pursue a pedagogy of human connection might find themselves in emotional affinity spaces where they explore their emotional experiences of dis/connection to better understand the relationship between their feelings, their identity, and the influence of policy and larger social structures. They would do this in a spirit of mutual empowerment, recognizing that their experiences are connected with their peers and vice versa and aiming for growth as individuals and as peers in professional relationships. Along the way, they may share autobiographical stories with one another, with their students, or their administrators as they aim for authenticity. This may mean coping with vulnerability and uncertainty, at which point teachers may return to

their emotional affinity spaces to discuss their experiences—and the spiral would continue towards deeper connections. In order for this cycle to operate successfully, school administrators, teacher educators, and policy makers may have to engage similarly with these processes.

As mentioned in the sections above, while a pedagogy of human connection grows from the classroom and teachers' lounge, there are implications for school administrators, too. For one, although no administrators were part of this study, the implication seems clear that administrators who can cultivate mutual empathy and authenticity with their teachers and students can also reap the benefits of a more connected school community. In fact, as leaders in the school, administrators can set the professional tone of mutual empathy and authenticity on campus. More practically, this can extend to supporting the coalitions that form in teachers' emotional affinity spaces, recognizing and valuing emotional knowledge, and using love and care to support and nurture their staff. Given the radical nature of love in schools, administrators who adopt a pedagogy of human connection might also use this framework to represent the interests of teachers to local policy makers. Finally, school administrators might use this framework to support professional development efforts that reflect the more relational ways that teachers learn (Korthagen, 2017).

Multiple scholars over several decades have called for teacher educators to recognize the role of emotional and relational aspects of teaching (Forgasz & Clemans, 2014; Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Noddings, 1984/2013; Zembylas, 2007). Notably, Zembylas (2007) provided empirical examples of ways that traditional pedagogical content knowledge included emotional ecologies, arguing for a conceptualization of content knowledge that included emotional knowledge. More recently, Korthagen (2017) described how teacher educators who historically struggled to reconcile theory with practice may have overlooked “the connections between

thinking and feeling” (p. 390). As such, Korthagen (2017) proposed “professional development 3.0” (p. 400), an approach to teacher education that centers the person doing the learning, including the relational and affective aspects of the person. Following these scholars, I suggest that teacher educators can include a pedagogy of human connection in a range of contexts.

In preservice teacher education, as emerging educators assess and explore their beliefs and attitudes, they can expand this work to include conceptions of mutual empathy and authenticity. Additionally, preservice work around a pedagogy of human connection can introduce students of education to the subversive nature of emotions in schools, thus supporting them early on in understanding how their emotions influence their identities in a school context. Also, in this study, some teachers found human connections through their content. As such, preservice teacher educators can demonstrate how mutual empowerment can be located in high-quality practices that connect students and teachers through successful learning or content mastery. Similarly, a pedagogy of human connection can also create space for preservice teachers to practice emotional affinity spaces in undergraduate classrooms or with cooperating teachers at the internship level, learning to embrace vulnerability and exploring the power of emotions and identity while recognizing the power structures which influence these feelings. Meanwhile, for inservice teachers, the development of emotional affinity spaces on school campuses is an ideal format for anchoring individuals’ adoption of a pedagogy of human connection. Beyond emotional affinity spaces, a pedagogy of human connection can support professional development as a way of addressing the social-emotional needs of teachers. Studies on teachers’ experiences during the pandemic often centered on burnout, indicating that teachers’ emotional resilience was palpable even while mental-health and well-being suffered (Fox & Walter, 2022; Kim et al., 2021). As such, teacher education addressing the emotional well-being

should be a priority for teacher educators at both the pre- and inservice levels. Beyond the realm of classrooms—in schools and at colleges—a pedagogy of human connection also has implications for policymakers.

The emerging scholarship on the crisis of connection, along with the Surgeon General's declaration of an epidemic of isolation and loneliness, should signal to educational policy makers that human connection is a main priority. As teachers and administrators pursue pedagogies of human connection in their classrooms and schools, local, state- and federal-level policymakers can support these efforts by working to ensure the adoption of policies that are pro-connection and minimize the effects of isolation and disconnection. My recommendation for all policy makers is to assess existing and new policies in light of their connective capacities, asking: does this policy isolate or connect? One example is a school policy of restorative justice versus punitive approaches such as suspensions and expulsions. Restorative justice efforts focus on relational and contextual understandings of an indiscretion, bringing together a community of effected individuals to understand the individual and social context of an incident and work to repair relationships in the fallout, rather than isolating and punishing the student (Payne & Welch, 2015). The focus on communal and relational understanding is in direct line with the aims of a pedagogy of human connection, and I recommend school boards assess their policies to ensure that isolation and disconnection are limited to the extent possible.

Isolation and disconnection go beyond the school, however. To this end, I would also ask the policymakers at the state and federal level to reassess policies in light of human connection and revise those which serve to isolate. Education policies such as high-stakes standardized testing do not appear to support connection: these tests are for accountability and do not reflect an understanding of human connection which is not only vital to the function of our democracy

but also indicative of the future for which we are preparing students. As technology advances, students need to focus on the social and affective elements of their world: collaboration, inquiry, and ethical use of technology should be the aims of education today (Mathis, 2022).

Additionally, recent research indicates that levels of homeschooling, including full-time virtual schools and in-home instruction, are on the rise (Hudson et al., 2023). That trend is worrisome in the context of an epidemic of isolation and is particularly more pronounced against a collective and long-growing distrust of public schools (Berliner & Hermanns, 2022). Schools that are more human-centered in their classroom and school policies and adopt curriculums focused on connection, collaboration, inquiry, and ethics are essential to the future of our democracy and reflective of the larger possibilities of a pedagogy of human connection.

This study has described the essence of the participants' experiences of connection during the COVID-19 pandemic, the conclusions of which have led to the advancement of a pedagogy of human connection. A pedagogy of human connection relies upon two fundamental pursuits: the cultivation of mutual growth and the cultivation of authenticity. Through reflection and storytelling, teachers can enter into emotional affinity spaces to explore dis/connection and the emotional and political realities which influence that interdependent phenomena in the hopes of making meaningful connections in classrooms and schools. This emerging framework is meant to be in flux and pursued as a point of embarkation; it is something hopeful in its incompleteness. This study, too, was not all-encompassing, and in the next section I address the limitations of this work. Following this, I offer the reader my concluding thoughts and bring this project to a close.

Limitations

As a qualitative study that used interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study had limitations. First, as a study of nine teachers in New Jersey during the COVID-19 pandemic, the

findings reflect a highly specific time and place and may not be easily generalizable to larger populations. Zembylas (2005) demonstrated the value in longitudinal studies of teacher emotion and identity, and this study may have benefited from a longer duration. Additionally, this study purposely pursued participants who expressed an interest in or valued making connections with students. As such, my understanding of dis/connection may have been more robust had I recruited individuals who did not value connections with students.

Additionally, this study omitted the experiences of the students, parents, and administrators in relation to whom the participants experienced dis/connection. Including these perspectives may have provided a multi-perspectival and richer understanding of dis/connection as a phenomenon. It may also have supported an understanding of the ways that a school's community can influence experiences of dis/connection for teachers and for families and the larger community. In terms of the study's design, participant selection was not purposefully reflective of local or national group demographic features (i.e., race, class, gender expression, or sexual orientation), further limiting the study's generalizability. Finally, as a fundamentally subjective research methodology, interpretative phenomenological analysis relies on an idiographic approach to data analysis which may lead to a different interpretation of the participants' experience by different researchers.

In the future, I recommend that research on human connection in schools expands to include perspectives and experiences of individuals and communities that reflects a more intentionally diverse population. Future studies of human connection should also be purposefully focused on aspects of social justice and equity to understand the ways that implicit bias and structural inequalities influence experiences of dis/connection. Additionally, I recommend studies of human connection take place over a longer time period and with a range of participants

who do not overtly value emotional or relational connections in classrooms. Finally, I recommend that future studies of human connection explore relationships between schools and communities, as well as the role of parents and families in students and teachers' efforts at mutual growth and achieving authentic connections.

Concluding Thoughts

I set out on this project in order to more fully understand teachers' experiences with human connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have since learned that connection is an emotional phenomenon interdependent with disconnection; an understanding of one requires an understanding of the other. I learned, too, how the pandemic was not only a time of global isolation and loneliness, it was also a time when the identity of teachers was threatened. Teachers' identity is influenced by their emotional experiences, values, and attitudes, which factor into their approaches to the work of teaching. So long as teachers' experiences and emotional knowledge are marginalized or diminished in favor of rationalistic ways of knowing their identity—their work and livelihood—is at risk. A pedagogy of human connection may offer a frame of reference for teachers, school leaders, community organizers, and education researchers to begin forging connections in classrooms and schools for the sake of our collective well-being. It is not hyperbole when I say that the good of our society may depend upon this kind of work.

In his book *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (2019), Nicholas A. Christakis advanced a theory that social connection is an evolutionary trait: “like other behaviors that have helped our species to survive and reproduce, the human ability to construct societies has become an instinct. It is not just something we *can* do—it is something we *must* do” (p. 13; author's emphases). Through his research, Christakis (2019) uncovered what he called the

“social suite” of eight features common to all societies which include: a capacity for recognizing and claiming individual identities; teaching and learning as social functions; cooperation; love for spouses and children; making friends and building social networks; some semblance of hierarchy; and a preference for your in-group over another (p. 13). Christakis’ research does not paint an overly idealistic or utopian picture of human societies, and he recognized that history is replete with examples of human society’s capacity for horrific acts. In fact, he recognized this aspect of his work by invoking the notion of “theodicy,” which is the metaphysical tension that arises when one questions the existence of God in a world filled with evil. Christakis (2019) offered this point to make his counterpoint: a theory of “sociodicy” which he described as “the vindication of our confidence in the virtue of society despite its numerous failures” (p. 418). Just as the epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been perpetuated by systemic disparities and the inherent violence of many aspects of our society, it can be tempting to believe these long-lasting injustices—and, by proxy, the crisis of connection—will continue unabated. However, like Christakis (2019), I am optimistic that our collective predisposition towards connection, and our individual capacities for emotional knowledge, love, and care can guide us free of this blight.

In the end, teaching and learning are vital to society, and teachers are uniquely positioned to cultivate human connections in their classrooms—connections which can lead to a more loving and just society. Armed with an understanding that this work requires bravery but is vital to the livelihood of our collective and individual health in schools and beyond, I believe teachers are uniquely situated through their emotional knowledge and labor to lead us out of the epidemic of isolation and loneliness, just as they led each other and their students through the COVID-19 pandemic. As I have learned throughout this study: loneliness need not last forever. Beyond my own experiences and those documented here, I take heart in Christakis’s (2019) ultimate

conclusion that “The arc of our evolutionary history is long. But it bends toward goodness” (p. 419). Christakis’s (2019) words remind me that my actions are part of a human history that will last far longer than my individual lifetime. I move forward through my life guided by the hope that our history continues to bend towards the good and the knowledge that the arc of goodness is realized when individuals—you and I—work together for justice and liberation in the name of love.

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